
Bridging the fields of feminist and systems practice: Building ecosystems for gender equity

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Introduction

We need feminist leadership -- and system change strategies -- today more than ever. Complex challenges of the moment, like climate change, the COVID-19 crisis, racism, rising economic inequality and gender based violence call for new ways of leading. These new approaches demand leaders to move away from traditional hero style leadership towards relational approaches and emergence.

➔ But how do we get there?

At The Gender Lab, we have had the great honour of walking with and learning from many Canadian and international systems change and feminist initiatives over the last four years. The Gender Lab has led and collaborated on several initiatives in recent years that have provided fertile ground for growing insights about what feminist work and systems change practice can offer to each other.

Through collective inquiry, learning communities, convening, collaboration and experimentation our work has been guided by these questions:

- ➔ **What is unique about feminist approaches to systems change?**
- ➔ **How can this learning contribute to systems change practice?**
- ➔ **How can we leverage the emerging field of systems change to advance gender equity and women's leadership?**

We are now ready to share our insights and birds' eye view, rooted in the experience and wisdom of these inspiring initiatives as well as our own feminist organizing work. We are inspired by the creative possibilities for impact and learning that emerge when we bridge between systems change and intersectional feminist practices. The knowledge and wisdom inherent in these two fields can serve to strengthen each other's efforts to shift unhealthy systems towards an equitable, sustainable, just world.

This report sets out to share the key learning and insights that have emerged through this inquiry and through our work.

- ➔ **Section 1** identifies where systems change and feminist practices are aligned and how they might work together to nourish each other.
- ➔ **Section 2** looks more in depth at the practice of systems change through a gender lens. Specifically, we share the learning and impact of a cohort of eight collaborative initiatives working to shift systems in housing, justice, pay equity and childcare in Canada.
- ➔ **Section 3** asks, What is unique about feminist systems change practice, and what wisdom can it offer other change work?
- ➔ **Section 4** explores how gender equity organizing and advocacy can be amplified, drawing on experiences and practice from the field of systems change.

The Gender Lab

The Gender Lab was launched at MetaLab in 2016 in Montreal, Canada and reaches out to collaborate around the world. The Gender Lab works at the intersections to 1) bridge gender justice and systems innovation fields and practice, 2) center women's lived experiences and narratives as a catalyst for change and 3) leverage resources across gender and innovation fields.

Key collaborations that gave rise to our learning and insights gathered in this article:

A. In 2018, in partnership with Ashoka Global and with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, we convened Ashoka fellows from across the globe to gain insights into the edges of women leading systems change, identify new patterns, and deepen the impact of social entrepreneurship through the weaving of gender analysis and respect for women's ways of leading and creating change.

B. In Canada, we worked with eight collaborative gender equity initiatives over three years (2017-2019) to learn about, evaluate and coach them on systems change strategies. These initiatives worked at various scales from local to national and were working to shift women's access to housing, justice, pay equity and childcare.

C. We partnered up with Systems Studio to create The Systems Sanctuary - a peer learning platform for systems leaders where we recently launched the System Sisterhood to convene women system leaders and to facilitate a collective inquiry into emerging systems practices, challenges and possibilities for women systems leaders.

Why gender? Why now?

The issues dominating the headlines are often closely tied to the gendered dimensions of power, including the rise of populist male leaders, sexual harassment, human trafficking and health care. At the same time, around the world, there have been significant changes in favour of gender equity. Important public narratives and political discourse, and in some cases funding and policies, have shifted for many of the issues that feminist movements are addressing - like gender based violence, justice for survivors, childcare and economic empowerment.

We are in an important political moment.

Women and non-binary people -- and our ways of knowing

and leading -- are key to shifting systems. We are key innovators with solutions for change. Women who are on the front lines, those with lived experiences of violence and exclusion, have perspective and vision to lead change.

Yet these voices are rarely heard in the mainstream. While there is growing demand that the people most affected by an issue must be involved in designing and implementing solutions, power centres still revolve around the dominant culture and perspectives of privilege. Despite the fact that women are better equipped to be relational leaders, meaning their socialization in the world equips them to better share power and collaborate, women remain underrepresented in high level leadership positions - across the board.

Our inspiration

We were inspired to explore feminist practice and systems change for a number of reasons. First, from our experience we knew that the emerging field of systems change aligns with the underlying values of feminist practice. Both challenge traditional forms of hierarchy, systems of dominance and hero focussed leadership. From a systems lens, we understand that we require new leadership and ways of collaborating to address the complex issues we are tackling as a society. With this in mind, we believe that feminist approaches and systems change can work together to address unhealthy systems in powerful ways.

Second, at this unique time when gender equality and gender-based violence are in the zeitgeist, we see opportunities to accelerate and increase impact by getting gender equity out of the margins and into the mainstream change arena. Feminist change work has been burdened by underfunding, a scarcity mindset as well as silos and lack of recognition and connection with other change fields. Yet women's equality groups also demonstrate systems change savvy, deep continuity by building on decades of work, sophisticated approaches to inclusion and integrity in leadership.

We hope our work has meaning for others. We also look forward to collaborating in the future to strengthen ecosystems of system actors working to advance gender equity.



Alignment between feminist and systems change practices

While gender equity-seeking organizations have been working systematically for decades, systems change practice is an emerging field of practice based in complexity science and systems thinking.

Frameworks and methods from the systems change field can complement feminist practice and expand the tool box for change leaders by offering new methods, frameworks and tools to think about strategy and to support practice. At the same time, feminist practice can strengthen systems change initiatives by offering analysis and tools to strengthen approaches to equity and power.

What we observe in the systems change field

Too often, changemaking initiatives are presumed to be gender neutral - for example those addressing climate change, just transition, food security, or innovation. But the impact of these issues is highly gendered, and they impact women differently depending on how they are situated at intersections of gender, race, class and colonial hierarchies. We believe many systems change initiatives have an opportunity to integrate a gender analysis and bridge with gender equity initiatives to grow and increase their impact.

We have also been in many “systems change” events, meetings and projects that are blind to structural inequality, including how intersections of gender, race and class play out in power, access to resources and decision making. The systems change field as it is emerging is dominantly western, white and academic and questions related to equity and power are a collective learning edge.

That said, we have also observed a growing number of systems leaders who are already centered in community and weaving together systems change practices and diverse lineages and ways of knowing. Indigenous, feminist, intersectional and justice movements are at the forefront of their work.

Another key observation is that many social change leaders, often those from marginalized communities, are doing systems change work, but they might not call it that. They are systems leaders in their own right but are not necessarily invited to spaces in the field of “systems change”. They may not be present at ecosystem convenings, have few opportunities to share their perspectives in systems change projects. They may raise their voices and concerns that many so-called systems change initiatives are not addressing inequity and, in fact, may risk perpetuating the inherent inequities in our systems. When these leaders seek funding to advance their systems change work, they often face barriers, lack the recognition, or access to power centers networks to secure it.

Systems change initiatives that do not yet have a knowledge base around power and privilege can learn from intersectional feminist frameworks and practices. Intersectional feminist analysis can help systems practitioners challenge dominant power structures and bring an equity lens to its analysis, practice and strategy. It can deepen an understanding of the structural and discriminatory barriers created by racism, colonization, sexism and economic marginalization. This will in turn lead to better and new strategies when addressing any systemic issue.

What is systems change?

“Systems change is an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system. It is a journey which can require a radical change in people’s attitudes as well as in the ways people work. Systems change aims to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures which make the system operate in a particular way. These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures and values.”¹

Systems change practice is based on key concepts including²:

- Complex problems are interconnected with their environment
- Explores interdependencies
- Emergence
- Self-organization
- Unpredictability and non-linearity
- Relationships are everything

1. Source: 2015, National Philanthropy Centre, *Systems change: A guide to what it is and how to do it*

2. *A Complexity Science Primer: What is Complexity Science and Why Should I Learn About It?* Adapted from *Edgware: Lessons From Complexity Science for Health Care Leaders*, by Brenda Zimmerman, Curt Lindberg, and Paul Plsek, 1998, Dallas, TX: VHA Inc..



What we observe in the gender equity field

The reality of funding cuts to gender equity organizations at both local and national levels over the last few decades has meant that feminist change work is burdened by lack of resources. This reality reinforces scarcity mindsets and sets up unhealthy competition amongst people and communities working towards similar goals. In addition, gender equity work is often working on the margins, responding to crises and working in silos. This in turn creates a lack of recognition for the issues they are taking on and a lack of connection with other change fields.

Women's grassroots organizations that are working to shift systems are far too often disconnected and working in isolation. Similar projects may be tackling similar issues in different regions, but they lack infrastructure to learn from and collaborate with colleagues struggling to effect the same change. Further, important cross-sectoral work lack connections to gender equity, while important thinking/action in the gender equity field is not making links to other interconnected issue domains.

Yet women's equality groups also demonstrate systems change savvy, deep continuity by building on decades of feminist work, sophisticated approaches to inclusion and integrity in leadership.

Systems change is not a new concept for feminist organizers; understanding the personal as political and the need for cultural and transformative change has been a part of feminist theory and practice since before our time. Yet, the field of systems change is growing and is an exciting practice area where new tools and approaches are helping change leaders make sense of complex problems and do strategy in new ways. There is an opportunity to leverage systems change resources and practice - to help overcome silos and to advance the vision and goals inherent in gender equity work.

What is feminist practice?

Feminist practice is rooted in creating change that transforms systems of violence, inequality and dominance towards systems of collaboration and fairness and shared power.

Intersectional feminism³ takes into account the intersecting and multiple gender identities based on race, class, ability, sexual identity and interlocking systems of power that impact people based on social location.

Feminist practice includes concepts like:

- ➔ Systemic
- ➔ Centers women's experience
- ➔ Intersectionality
- ➔ Pays attention to power
- ➔ Subjective

How do systems change and feminist organizing practices align and nourish each other?

Systems change and feminist practice are aligned in terms of values and approaches.

Systems change practice, rooted in complexity thinking, values emergence as well as the interconnected and interdependent nature of the systems we are aiming to shift. It recognizes that outdated worldviews rooted in Newtonian thinking are limited by reductionism and a belief that we can solve problems by fixing the parts of the whole⁴. Complexity and systems thinking value self-organizing principles and decentralized approaches. This supports feminist change practice that seeks to shift power from traditional hierarchical structures of dominance to new ways of thinking about collaboration that share power and resources. Systems practices also work with unpredictability and non-linearity in understanding change and recognize that relationships are a key component and capacity in efforts.

Systems change aligns with feminist values in that feminist practice has traditionally worked at a systemic level and at the root of problems. In this spirit, feminist practice centers the

experiences and voices of women and brings an intersectional lens to understanding the nature of any problem. As such intersectionality brings a holistic view to issues and sharpens our focus on power and the role it plays in maintaining the status quo in systems.

Systems practice values the diversity of actors in the system. Feminist practice brings this to life through intersectionality. An intersectional feminist lens⁵ recognizes that people do not experience systems in the same way and that multiple and intersecting identities compound the layers of privilege, discrimination and barriers depending on where one is located. Feminist practice gives us a lens to see and engage diverse actors in the system. Feminist practice also offers vast amounts of experience in systemic power analysis and creating the conditions to work across difference.

Finally, feminist practice values subjectivity and recognizes the agency of actors in the system, while systems practice too asks practitioners to locate themselves in the system as part of their analysis and action.

Alignment between systems change and feminist practice = Shared values



3. In 1989, American legal scholar and civil rights activist, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to explain how race intersects with gender to produce barriers for Black women. *Columbia Journalism Review*. The origin of the term 'intersectionality.' Merrill Perlman. 2018.

4. *Edgware: Lessons From Complexity Science for Health Care Leaders*, by Brenda Zimmerman, Curt Lindberg, and Paul Plsek, 1998, Dallas, TX: VHA Inc.

5. Learn more about intersectionality here: [Time Magazine. What's Intersectionality? Let These Scholars Explain the Theory and Its History.](#) Arica L. Coleman. 2019.

Weaving and integrating different ways of knowing

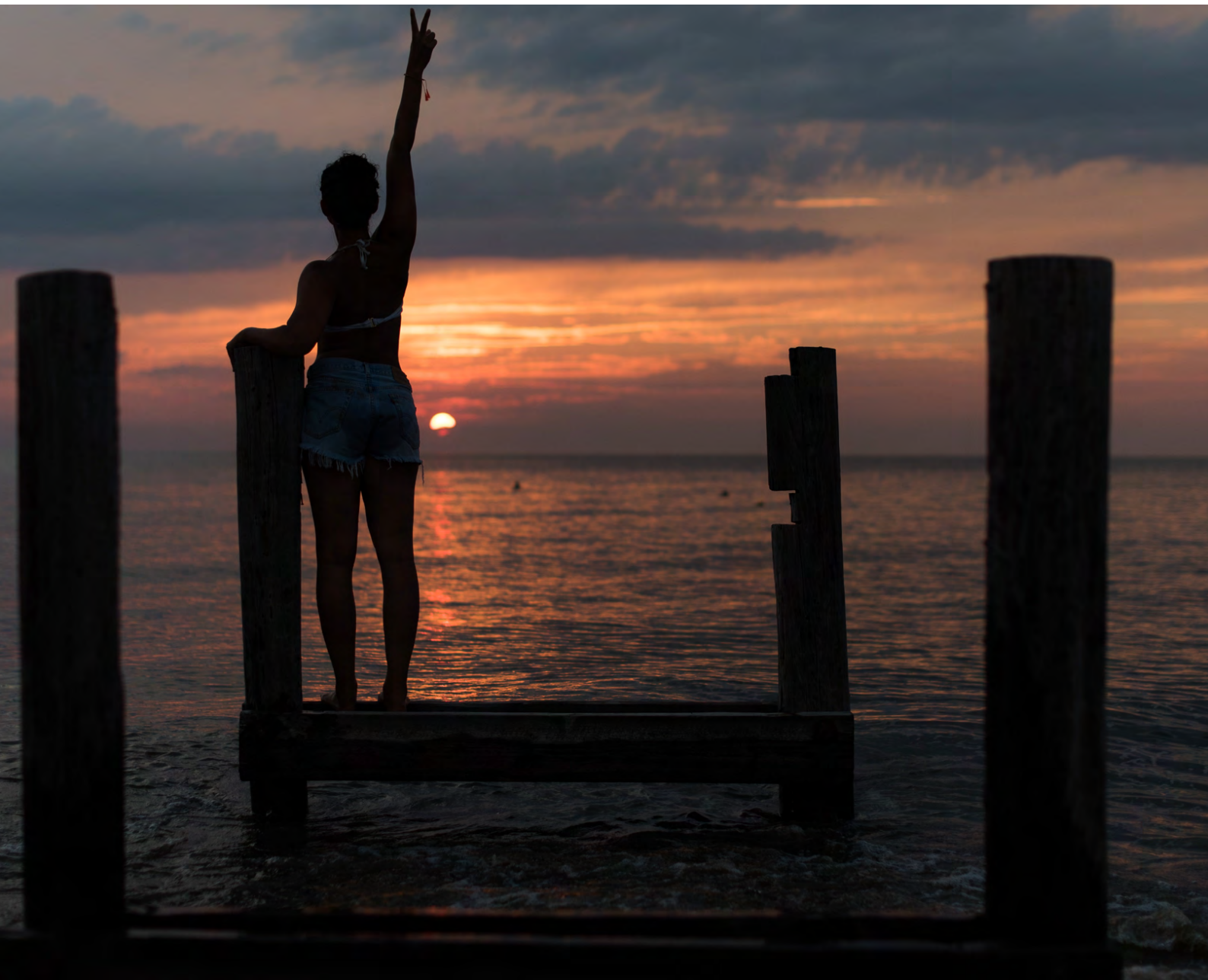
We, like most of you reading this, want to be wiser and better in our change efforts. We believe that feminist change leaders can leverage the resources and tools found in the systems change tool box. And we know there is a wealth of learning and knowledge to be harnessed from intersectional feminist analysis and practice that could strengthen the field of systems change.

For example, Tatiana was a founder and Juniper was involved in building and scaling a national network that aimed to support the empowerment and leadership of girls and young women from across Canada. In this work, we were informed by both a feminist analysis and complexity thinking, as we created the conditions to convene diverse communities across Canada. The network worked at shifting systemic issues that

girls were facing including normalized violence, challenges related to mental and physical health, and discriminatory barriers based on race, class and colonization.

With one foot in gender equity work, and one in complexity thinking, we have set out to bridge these practice fields with the belief that we may find powerful paths for systems change by weaving these practices together.

The following chapters in this report share our key insight: opportunities to leverage feminist practice and systems change, to create powerful and just movements for transformational change on a whole range of (interconnected) issues.





On the ground: Feminist systems change in action

Introduction: A systems change evaluation and learning project

One of The Gender Lab's key projects in the last few years involved working with diverse feminist groups across Canada. From 2017 to 2019, we spearheaded a systems change learning and evaluation process with eight gender equity initiatives. Our mandate came from the Canadian federal Department for Women and Gender Equality (WAGE), which was also the main funder for the eight initiatives. This was a relatively new and unique approach by a government grantmaker that sought to deepen the understanding of how women's organizations and partnership projects could bring about systems change. We hope that other funders will follow this lead.

Our role as evaluators and coaches was to evaluate the systems change impact and support learning with this cohort of initiatives. Our objectives were to: 1) understand the systemic impact of the initiatives as a whole and 2) contribute

to strategic learning to inform the initiatives during implementation as well as future initiatives to influence systems change to advance gender equity.

Each initiative was a collaborative project, involving two to eight partner organizations each. Partner organizations were generally women's organizations but also included advocacy groups, networks, professional alliances, service providers and communications firms. The cohort included three local-level, four provincial and one national scale initiative. They each addressed an important feminist issue, including women's access to justice, housing, childcare and pay equity.

In this section we describe key practices, approaches and lessons learned about how gender equity organizations are doing systems change gathered during this unique project.

Learning Process Design

In designing the evaluation and learning process, we drew on emerging knowledge and tools in the field of systems change and collective impact evaluation as well as gender-based analysis and intersectional feminist frameworks. The approach was both grounded in the realities of gender equity organizations and made use of innovative systems change theory and tools.

The strategic learning process was both structured and emergent. We responded to learning opportunities and knowledge needs of each initiative and designed learning and coaching sessions based on patterns and trends we discovered during the data collection and analysis. We facilitated strategic learning among gender equity organizations through these vehicles:

→ Systems mapping sessions with each initiative

Day-long Systems Mapping sessions were held with each initiative during Year 1. Each initiative invited not only their core partners to participate but also other collaborators and stakeholders. These sessions provided initiatives and their invited partners with activities to understand the complexity of their respective issues and identify new strategic insights and levers, or opportunities to effect change. Systems Mapping was helpful for many of the initiatives to collaboratively

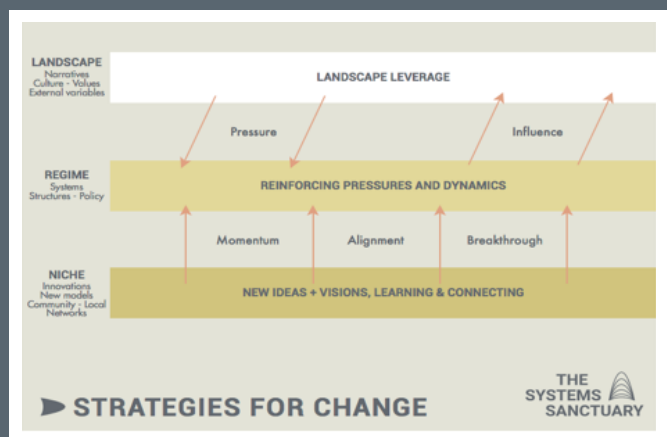
think through project goals and strategy at an early stage. We facilitated Iceberg,⁶ System Actor⁷ and Outcomes Mapping⁸ in each session. The goal was not to create a fixed system map for each initiative, but to use the mapping process as a tool to generate new ways of understanding the issues and opportunities for change as well as system actors' roles, relationships and power to impact the system.

→ Strategy Map

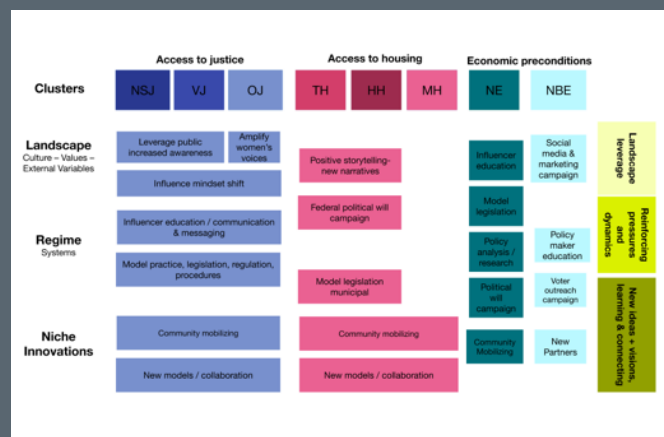
Early in the process we developed a tool we called the Strategy Map. This tool illustrated which systems change tactics were being used by each of the initiatives. Each tactic was organized on the map according to level, based on the three levels in Geels' Socio-Technical Transition Theory⁹: 1) generating local and niche innovations, 2) influencing policies and institutions and 3) influencing the socio-cultural-economic landscape. The Strategy Map was used for our analysis as evaluators and

coaches. In addition, we referred to the Strategy Map during Peer Learning Sessions with the gender equity groups to help them better understand which tactics they were choosing to emphasize and to see how their tactics at the different levels were interacting. Often the Strategy Map was a tool for asking questions: What are we best positioned to do in the system? Where are their gaps in action at each level? which strategic alliances could help fill those gaps?

Transition Theory (Geels 2011)



Strategy Map Gender Equity Projects



6. M. Goodman, (2002), *The Iceberg Model* by Hopkinton, MA: Innovation Associates Organizational Learning. Copyright 2002 by M. Goodman.

7. Actor maps are a type of system map designed to reveal the network of people and organizations within a given system and how they are interrelated. Check Systems Innovation guide here: [Actor Mapping Guide](#)

8. Learn more about [Outcomes Mapping here](#)

9. We adapted STS Theory from Geels, F. W. (2002). Technological transitions as evolutionary reconfiguration processes: a multi-level perspective and a case-study. *Research Policy*, 31(8-9), 1257-1274; see also: FW Geels, "The Multi-Level Perspective on Sustainability Transitions: Responses to Seven Criticisms," *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2011): 24-40.; FW Geels and Johan Schot, "Typology of Sociotechnical Transition Pathways," *Research Policy* 36, no. 3 (April 2007): 399-417



Systems Change Evaluation: Framework and data collection

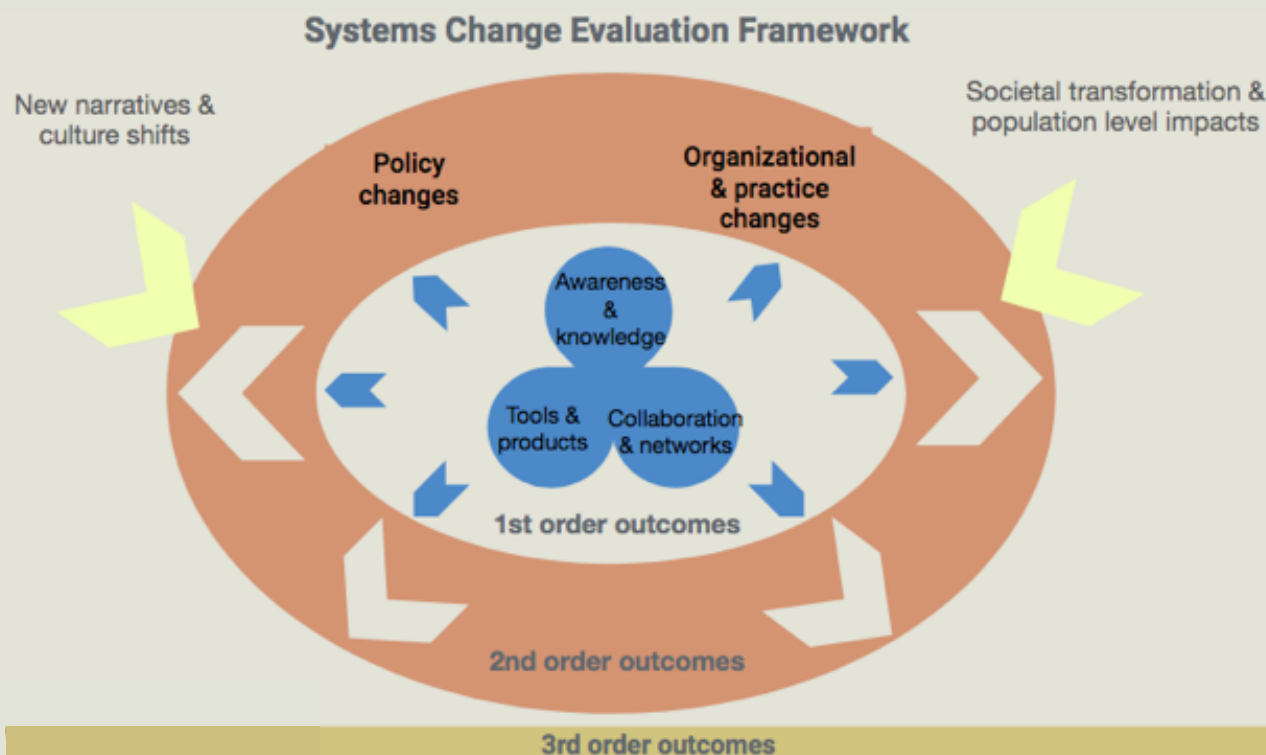
We developed a Systems Change Evaluation Framework from the ground up, that is, working from the eight initiatives' intended outcomes rather than from our own predetermined outcomes. We facilitated outcomes mapping sessions with each initiative and examined their project plans to understand which stakeholders they were aiming to influence and what type of behaviour change they hoped to bring about.

- ➔ **What systems actors are the initiatives attempting to engage and influence?**
- ➔ **What types of behaviour change are the initiatives attempting to bring about in key systems actors in order to shift the system?**

We were delighted when we started to see clear patterns in the intended outcomes across initiatives working on different issues: housing, access to justice for survivors of violence, pay equity and child care. Despite the different scales (local, provincial and national) and focal issues, there were considerable similarities in the systems actors, the behaviour changes and the broad challenges and goals the initiatives were attempting to address.

We then set about to see if any existing systems change frameworks were aligned with the patterns emerging from the initiatives. We chose Steve Williams' "Societal Effects Framework"¹⁰ because it was comprehensive and showed the relationship between shorter-term, easier-to-achieve outcomes and broader, lasting impacts. We adapted Williams' framework by changing some terms to reflect concepts used in the gender equity field. In our revised framework, "1st order" outcomes include improved relationships and networks in the system, improved knowledge and capacity, and new tools and resources. "2nd order" outcomes occur when there are changes in system actors' practices and policies. "3rd order" outcomes in our framework are "New narratives and culture shifts" and "Population-level transformation", reflecting profound or wide-reaching societal and cultural shifts.

The process of identifying systems change outcomes and indicators with this cohort of gender equity organizations was useful for facilitating learning as well as tracking their impact. Evaluation helped bring awareness and offer concepts to the initiatives to better define what they were doing and why, and their expected results.



© MetaLab, Tatiana Fraser and Juniper Glass Adapted from Williams, S. (2017) Evaluating Sustainability Transition Experiments in Times of Rapid

10. Williams, Steve. 2017. Evaluating Societal Effects of Transdisciplinary Co-production Processes: Final Report. <https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/sites/mistraurbanfutures.org/files/Evaluating-societal-effects-Steve-Williams.pdf>



Peer learning sessions with groups of initiatives together (clusters)

An important part of this project was using peer exchange to support learning on systems change strategy. Over the course of the three years, we facilitated a total of fourteen peer learning sessions by videoconference, with two or three initiatives participating in each call. These sessions were a lightly structured space for initiatives to convene and discuss their strategies, challenges, observations of the shifting landscape and what was working. Initiatives learned from one another, gathered tools and resources that they did not have had access to before and supported each other in finding solutions to strategic challenges.

Feedback from gender equity groups on the peer learning sessions:



It is good to hear [about the] on-the-ground activities and learnings of other projects with the overlay of the deep thinking. Complex systems change theory is new to me and helpful to understand what we are experiencing, eg. resistance in the system, and how to chart a path forward.



I appreciate the combination of the theory and hearing what other people are doing. It helps to shift focus. When people struggle in this field, it's like shoveling water with a pitchfork. No, it is not just you or your organization that is facing this barrier: it is systemic. Helpful hearing others' ideas about how to circumvent those challenges and do things differently in the future.



When these sessions end, our relationships end. I would like to find concrete opportunities to work together on. Find something in common to build on.



→ Capacity building workshops for all initiatives

We facilitated capacity building through a number of vehicles including one-to-one coaching sessions, webinars, and site visits. Capacity building topics we covered included: system change strategy development, analysis of actors and relationships in the system, evaluation coaching, sensemaking sessions, and reflection sessions on key learning.

→ Strategy Journals

We collected data about strategic learning through Strategy Journals, which were submitted by each initiative every six months over the first two years and once in the final year. In addition, we recorded and analysed notes from all peer learning and coaching sessions.

→ System actor interviews

We also interviewed a number of system actors related to each initiative during the final year of the project. Interviewees included public servants, private funders, nonprofit organizations, and representatives from public agencies such as housing and justice departments. We wanted to see the impact of the gender equity initiatives through their eyes. The perspectives of system actors were extremely valuable and the vast majority validated what the initiatives had self-reported regarding their strategic challenges and their impact on the system.



The recent uptake in using system tools/maps/ways of perceiving and navigating system strategy and outcomes, that connects us more than divides us. People have been taking to it enthusiastically, using the language and eager to “get it” and use it.



Impact: Emerging presence, influence and leadership in the system

What have these gender equity organizations been able to achieve? Comparing 2017, when the initiatives started, to early 2020, as we are writing this, we observe that the gender equity field in Canada has risen in prominence. Governments and other actors are becoming more conscious of gender inequity and more motivated to act in response; feminist and gender equity groups are positioned to provide expertise. The ways gender equity groups are creating the conditions to shift systems and have an impact show up in a number of ways:

1 Influence and leadership

One of the key shifts we observed over the three years is that, increasingly, other system actors are looking to gender equity and women's organizations as experts and seeking their assistance. Gender equity groups are adding value by bringing important perspectives and systems analysis that had previously not been highly valued. Stepping into this leadership space builds momentum and acts as a magnet to other system actors who are starting to see the systemic gaps.

2 Increased presence at decision making tables

Many initiatives observed that organizations representing women and communities with lived experience are increasingly invited to spaces (committees, advisory roles, policy tables) in which policies and systemic practices are reviewed and discussed.

3 The role as a host or convenor in the system

Several initiatives created venues where diverse system actors could build connections and advance understanding on the issues. Often there was no other system actor playing this role, so the initiatives stepped in, providing this form of leadership. Both formal and informal convening created opportunities for system actors to circulate good ideas, key messages, resources, alternative approaches, and models.

4 Bringing gender frameworks to new places

A number of initiatives brought forward a new lens to influence existing programs and services, particularly encouraging system actors to incorporate intersectional analysis (including GBA+), apply trauma-informed and survivor-based approaches, and better address marginalized people's experiences. Thus, initiatives often played a guiding role for other system actors regarding new and improved practices.



More allies are taking positions on gender equity, speaking up. Stakeholders are more willing to question themselves. A lot is moving, and this fits the general trend in our society, where more women are saying, we need to be represented in leadership, decision making. We need to be recognized and seen in policies.”



“Partners are understanding that policy change is about more than band-aid solutions--they are inter-related and connected... The sector, at times, wants quick and easy answers /solutions to complex problems and so we have to balance our approach to ensure that we recognize the urgency with the long-term solutions. Not so much a new learning, but a reinforcement that systems change and building knowledge within the sector is long-term work.”

5 Influencing practice and public policy

Over the course of the three years, the approaches and practices of women's organizations were increasingly adopted by system actors such as police, government agencies, and policy makers. Initiatives influenced the frameworks, concepts and principles being applied in public policy processes. Some initiatives succeeded in getting their issue higher on the political agenda and observed certain actors with influence such as elected representatives taking steps to advance their policy change proposals.

6 Breaking silos

System actors were increasingly responsive to the feminist practice of reframing issues to take into account their intersectionality, interconnection and complexity. This created opportunities for new collaborations and strengthened the possibility of work across silos. Silos started to be reduced at several levels: between grassroots and women's organizations working on gender equity, across different sectors, and across actors working in different issue areas. Some initiatives had a positive influence on organizations and institutions in their respective systems so that communication lines and coordination improved among them.

7 Re-framing systemic issues

Most initiatives paid attention to the way their focal issue was framed in public and policy discourse and had some success influencing the way the issue was talked about. Reframing changes not only the way a challenge is understood but also what solutions are possible. It also opens up potential to find new allies among system actors that did not previously regard the issue as relevant.

8 Influencing the narrative

We also observed that the stories emerging from "first voices," women's direct lived experience, were influencing system actors and high-level narratives. Key messages and concepts about the issues promoted by women's organizations gained traction in popular discourse and the media as well as among other system actors.



The main contribution of this initiative was through the creation of local networks and bringing together service providers, from many focus areas, brainstorming solutions, advancing case management, developing common goals from our individual positions. We talk about how everything is siloed and at every meeting we talk about acting to break the silos. That has been the biggest shift."



"There is a significant shift in narratives about women's housing - among systems actors, in media coverage and with public discussion. We are always using the phrase 'housing is not gender neutral' and this seems to be taking a hold in the narrative about housing and homelessness."

Key Strategies: Patterns we observed

How did this cohort of initiatives achieve this impact?

Early on, we started to see patterns that pointed to gender equity organizations' unique approaches and practices for influencing systems change. There was strategic learning to be drawn from both the initiatives' successes and their challenges influencing systems.

In this section, we present observations on systems

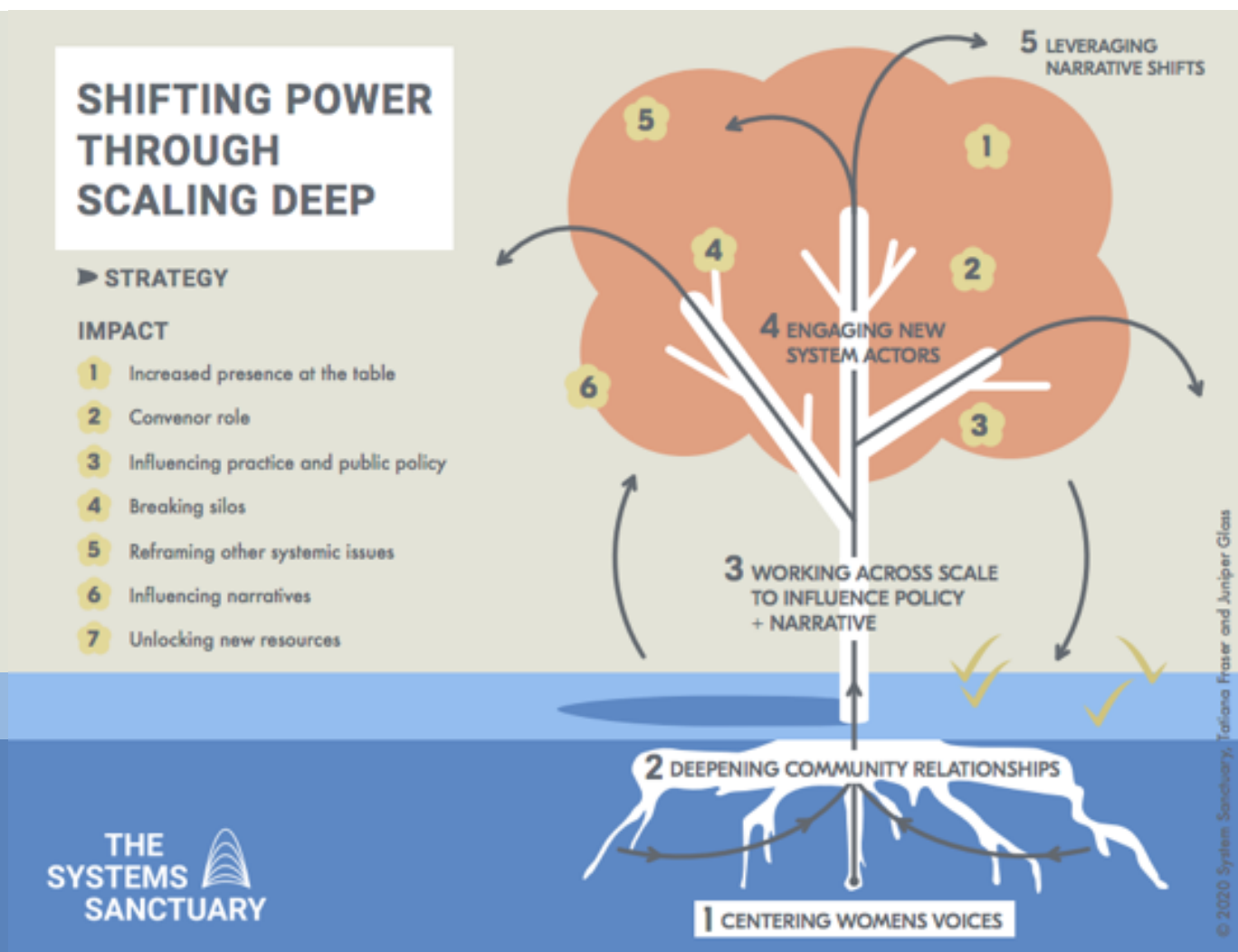
change strategies and tactics used by the eight initiatives.

It is important to point out that these eight projects were conceived separately, and achieved success in different ways. However, we think the patterns emerging regarding the way they approach changemaking are incredibly valuable. Understanding how feminist initiatives are influencing systems shows why they need to be better resourced, and inspires other systems change work on interconnected issues.

→ Tree of Impact

The image of a tree emerged as we were reflecting on the patterns of action among feminist initiatives. Here we describe the key aspects of this "Tree of Impact": which are

key elements of the strategies we observed and how they interacted in practice.



1 Centering 'first voices' = claiming power

A major pattern we saw across almost all initiatives was the centrality of the knowledge and voices of women with lived experience. This approach emphasizes the need to centre women and women's perspectives, and to claim the power in lived experience, rather than treating women as vulnerable or powerless victims. This is a significant reframe of dominant perspectives, which tend to either ignore women or focus on protecting them. During the early phase, all initiatives conducted needs assessments directly with women survivors of violence, women facing barriers to housing, or women in economic precarity. This phase was important research for action. It provided new information and understanding of barriers, complexity and diversity of the issues. The consultations and engagement of women with lived experience also had a positive impact for women themselves, providing platforms to share experiences and have a voice.

2 Deepening community relationships = shifting power centre of gravity

We observed that there was strategic value in the initiatives' core feminist organizing practices at the local level. These included listening to and supporting the leadership of organizations led by women with first-hand experience, engaging diverse communities of women and other community organizations as well as an emphasis on claiming power and deepening relationships. By supporting diverse women's organizations to collaborate and work together in new ways, initiatives were able to leverage others' strengths and make strategic interventions in ways they could not do alone. In addition, this strategy shows that power can be created through alliances of those on the margins, not just in working with the mainstream locations of power in the system.

3 Working across scale to influence practice, policy and narrative = multiple points of intervention

Initiatives that were working to influence change at multiple levels, appeared to be making the most impact. Multi-level action strategies usually involve working across different scales. For example, some initiatives used multiple strategies at the local level, putting effort into grassroots and network mobilization, as well as the more traditional policy advocacy, decision-maker education, and communications or campaigns to set the tone and language about how their issue is discussed.

4 Engaging with new system actors = targeting new power centres

Initiatives made efforts to both deepen and broaden engagement with system actors. This included work to influence the hearts and minds of more people as well as strategic relationship building to prepare the ground and create bridges to future policy influence. Some initiatives tested different ways of convening and building relationships. Many initiatives reported that certain mainstream system actors, who would not have been their usual collaborators, were open and eager to work with them.



There is a growing shift towards the understanding of the issue of pay equity as both one of human rights and economics. Particularly when we speak with members of the public and workers touched by pay inequity, we sense a growing impatience about pay equity. We have shifted from ignorance about pay equity, to misinformation, to understanding, and now to impatience [for change]. [Findings from a public opinion poll] demonstrated that the messages put forward by our campaign are reverberating across different and new networks.

5

Leveraging narrative shifts = working with culture

Initiatives responded to shifts in public discourse and societal narratives about gender equality in various ways. Some initiatives were able to ride the wave, benefitting from the increased attention and openness to gender equity in the landscape. Some initiatives had narrative influence capacity that helped them to maximize this wave.

To influence narratives and mindsets related to their focal issues, initiatives applied a number of innovative and effective tactics. Some initiatives used simple key messages that could be easily adopted by system actors and the public. The repetition of key messages in many different venues and through different channels seemed to create a sense of “inevitability” of change on some issues. Other tactics included generating debate during provincial elections, partnering with influential people in the system to craft messages, and using public opinion survey results to reinforce the key messages. A number of initiatives observed shifts in mainstream narratives about their issue to include more nuanced stories about women’s experiences. This represents momentum to move women’s voices and the messages of women’s organizations from the margins to the mainstream.

“

The initiative allowed us to make new partnerships with organizations we had never had the opportunity to approach before, such as a large union and an economic council. It allowed us the time opportunity and the funds to cultivate those relationships and expand our knowledge and networks—and the knowledge and networks of those system actors.



Towards a new, holistic framework of systems change

Analysis: Shifting power by scaling deep

These strategies - which we have observed as vital and integrated in feminist organizing - work together to create a unique systems change framework. This framework gives us

a new understanding of how we can shift power in systems change efforts.

→ Creating power outside of dominant structures:

We often see systems change interventions attempt to address dominant powers directly by trying to engage from the centre of the system. This new framework can be seen as de-centering dominant power structures and creating multiple centres of gravity in the traditionally 'marginalized' space - that are able

to influence change. In this way, the initiatives are shifting the power centre of gravity. This creates the space to establish new norms and to experiment with approaches to doing this differently, outside of dominant cultures and systems.

→ Scaling Deep:

One of the key patterns we have observed in the initiatives is that "scaling deep" is central to their change strategies. Tatiana Fraser coined the term "scaling deep"¹¹ in 2010 when she noticed that concepts of scale and change strategy were framed in traditional business growth models and she intuitively wanted to explore the depth of change in strategy. At that time, the social innovation field had identified two main directions for scaling social change: scaling out (replicating successful models and approaches in new places or populations) and scaling up (influencing policy and structural change). Scaling deep involves bringing about change at the cultural and individual personal level including shifting

mindsets, perceptions, cultural practices, habits and values. We believe that without such profound shifts, changes in structures and policies may not be sustained over time or have the desired impact. While "scaling up" is focussed on shifting policy, structures and systems, and "scaling out" is about replicating successful innovations to more locations, scaling deep involves bringing about change at the cultural and personal levels. All the work to center lived experience and to deepen relationships in the community are scaling deep. This work is relational and it includes shifting mindsets, perceptions, cultural practices, habits and values.

→ Interactions between levels:

According to emergent strategy, patterns that occur at small scales through individual interactions influence and create patterns at the next levels of the system: organizational, institutional and cultural. The signalling and interaction at

one scale creates patterns at the next scale. There is an inter-relatedness and interaction between scales: we are influenced and shaped and we our actions influence and shape.

11. Darcy Riddell and Michele-Lee Moore. 2015. *Scaling Out, Scaling Up, Scaling Deep: Advancing Systemic Social Innovation and the Learning Processes to Support it*. https://mccornellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ScalingOut_Nov27A_AV_BrandedBleed.pdf

Through scaling deep, we saw how gender equity initiatives were shifting the power centre of gravity. They created space to establish new norms and experiment with doing things differently, outside of dominant cultures and systems.



New framework: Power Shift Framework

We propose an adaptation of the Socio-Technical Transition theory model (STS), which we call the Power Shift Framework to help capture these insights about what it takes to influence systems change.

The STS model is used in systems change to map out and analyse interventions at multiple levels in systems change. It is useful as it highlights the importance of interactions between three levels: a) “niche”: local and smaller-scale initiatives, collaborations, and innovations, b) “regime”: broad structures, policies and institutions, and c) “landscape”: large economic, environmental, narrative and cultural influences on society. Working at multiple levels is a key strategy and capacity for systems change. Multi-level action strategies usually involve working across different scales.

The gender equity initiatives we accompanied were all working at multiple levels. However, in our analysis, we see patterns in strategy that call for a new layer to be added to the transition framework. The three layers in the STS model do not capture the deep work at the cultural level that the initiatives were doing, including with women who had lived experience and with the local communities and organizations close to these women and the issues. This important effort of listening, valuing lived experience, empowerment, deep relationship building, understanding intersectionality and sense making was the foundation of their efforts to influence change in the systems. Their initiatives could not have impact without this groundwork that rooted everything they did in the stories, values and experiences of people with lived experience.

We imagined the new layer to represent this deep work as the root systems, the work that happens in the soil. This is a space that is invisible to the rest of the world which only sees what is happening above the ground - the tree trunk, branches and leaves and the sky that surround the tree.

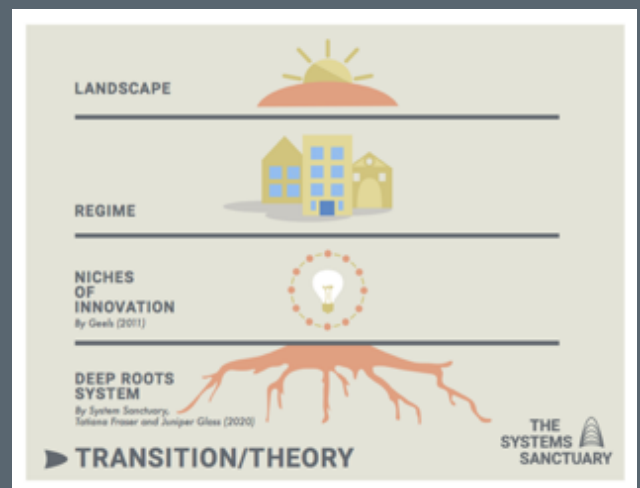
Root systems and soil nurture and feed trees. Scientists are only recently learning about how root systems communicate with each other and between different tree species, how they distribute life giving resources, and how they take care of each other to ensure the surrounding life ecosystems get what they need.

This metaphor captured the essence of this deep layer of systems change work, scaling deep. The other layers of the Tree of Impact are also important, as are the interconnections between them:

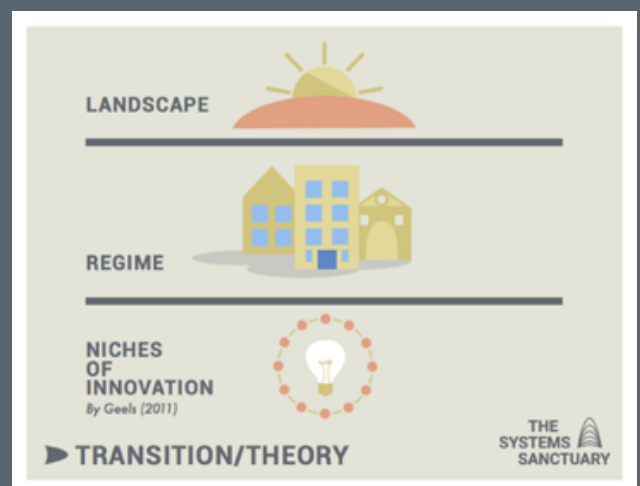
- **Roots** = Centering first voice and deepening community relationships are ways in which women’s gain their power
- **Trunk** = Influencing public policy and practice-changing the infrastructure of the system
- **Branches** = Engaging new systems actors - ways women’s orgs are building new and unlikely allies
- **Flowers** = New shoots. New ways in which women’s orgs are influencing the system
- **Air we breathe** = leveraging and influencing narrative shifts. The air we breathe. Shift in culture.

With this in mind, we propose an adapted STS framework that we will call the Power Shift Framework.

Power Shift Framework



Transition Theory Framework



The Power Shift Framework adds another layer to the Transition theory; the deep roots system defined by lived experience and community including: grassroots movements, personal and community transformation and healing, raising voices, self-empowerment, holistic understanding of the intersectionality of issues.

Like the root system in the Tree of Impact, this is a layer that reflects deep empowerment: valuing self and collective of like-minded groups and communities, valuing lived experience, turning marginalization and oppression into strength.

It also recognizes that different types of power exist. Beyond the mainstream and dominant types of power in the system, other centres can be generated. Power is not just held in the highly visible and traditional places (elected officials, company CEOs, heads of institutions, etc). Power can be built in the

margins, from authentic connections between people and groups working in solidarity. Once strong, these new centres of gravity can pull focus and start to become seen as sources of expertise and solutions, but on their terms rather than those of the dominant system. This individual, local and community power feeds the niche innovation level, interacts with the landscape level and provides alternatives to polarizing or power struggle directly with the regime level. We hope that this model of how systems change happens can feed feminist and other systems change movements and give visibility to their brilliant strategies already in action.

These are trends which may provide new insight both for gender equity work as well as the broader systems change field. Without profound shifts in culture, beliefs and attitudes, changes in structures and policies may not be sustained over time or have the desired impact.



We can see all the readiness for change, but what is it going to take for change to actually happen? When the women's movement first started addressing this issue there were lots of wins, such as new laws, but where the real shift has never happened is in attitudes."

How might we strengthen our efforts for change with a deepened understanding of the intersecting and gendered dimensions of the social and environmental issues societies face?



What can feminist practice teach us about systems change?

A feminist approach to systems change and leadership is unique. We have been interested in learning about how feminist leaders and initiatives are making a contribution to change in various systems. Our purpose in this section is to both to reinforce and recognize feminist systems leadership and to share this perspective with the broader systems change field.

What are feminist systems change practices?

Feminist approaches to social change are made up of several practices that interweave for added strength and cohesion in the strategy. These practices include critical power analysis, centring the knowledge of people with lived experience, trauma-informed practices, intersectionality and valuing relationships and different ways of knowing, especially that of women and non-binary people.

Critical power analysis

While systems change practice sets out to shift the status quo from harmful to healthy systems, the field of systems change often tends to lack power and equity analysis. A feminist analysis provides a lens to understand and question the status quo and assumptions underlining self-perpetuating, dominant systems.

Feminism challenges traditional notions of hierarchy and 'power over' inherent in dominant systems and works towards building collective and shared models for leadership and power. A feminist or critical power analysis will trace the connections between the individual experience to broad social, political and cultural structures and systems. This approach offers a lens to challenge individualistic notions of success and failure and to understand the construction of power, domination and oppression in systems. In this way we can see how his approach provides tools and frameworks to strengthen the analysis of power dynamics and strategies for change in a system.



Without attention to power, gender, race, and other intersectional identities in relational leadership research, it is possible that relational leadership could continue to reproduce existing inequities in organizations.”¹²



[There is opportunity] to redefine and share power and [we are] noticing the power at the grassroots level in the voluntary sector; it's inclusive, relational, collaborative and transformational; more thoughtful about the impact of decisions on a broader range of people; adaptive and constantly 'reading the field.'”

12. Donna F. Clark, MA, "Women, Relational Leadership and Power: A qualitative study of how senior women leaders experience, conceptualize, and practice leadership and power." Published by ProQuest LLC (2019), page 66



Centering lived experience and perspectives

This approach emphasizes the need to centre women and their perspectives, and to claim the power in lived experience, rather than treating women as a vulnerable group or powerless victims. This is a significant reframe of dominant perspectives, which tend to either ignore, erase or invisibilize women or focus on saving and protecting them.

Centering people with lived experience places value on the holistic human experience, including body, mind, and spirit. In practice this looks like:

- ➔ value lived experience when hiring and seeking collaborators
- ➔ provide supports, formal and informal, to allow women with lived experience to gain skills and confidence to make their full contribution to an initiative or group
- ➔ engage women with lived experience through conversation, interviews and storytelling, in groups and one to one
- ➔ engage women in participatory research to identify the needs and assets around an issue
- ➔ include women with lived experience in systems mapping and ecosystem building activities
- ➔ share power with women with lived experience in strategy development, leadership and decision making structures



We are reminded time and time again, that the experts are the survivors and that for the work to be transformative, survivors' voices and experiences need to be centered.

The partnership is beginning to provide an increased understanding of the experience of the African Nova Scotian community with both gender based violence, the system barriers to reporting, the over-representation of incarcerated black males and females, and the systemic racism that is both subtly and overtly at play. Understanding better our role as allies has become a more important part of our partnership, and also the possibility of alliance among the ANS and Indigenous communities who have both faced centuries of oppression, racism and abuse.”



Relational approaches to leadership

Systems change practice values relationships between system actors as central to the work of shifting outdated systems. This approach moves away from traditional hero style leadership towards relational approaches and emergence. It is well documented that women are better equipped than men to be relational leaders¹³, meaning their socialization in the world equips them to work with concepts of sharing power and collaboration.

Feminist systems change practice that focuses on local-level organizing shines light on the important deep relational work in community that builds a sense of power and rootedness from which to act. This also includes working across multiple communities that are traditionally marginalized to deepen understanding of different experiences and collaborate.

13. Chris Bart, Gregory McQueen, 2013, [Why Women Make Better Directors](#). *Int. J. Business Governance and Ethics*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2013



There is a lot of value from the partnerships because we get to bring together all of our networks and to stop working in silos on the issues of discrimination and housing. We are building social capital and agency among our groups and people with lived experience. Critically important and diverse perspectives to gain holistic insights. The collaborative model has been integral.”



Intersectionality

Intersectional feminist practice has been evolving methods of convening and facilitation that acknowledge multiple layers of power and privilege held by groups and individuals who are working together. These methods allow for contributions from everyone and acts of allyship and solidarity. Intersectionality “refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power.”¹⁴ Intersectionality considers the factors known to impact access to resources, power and influence, including class, ability,

sexual orientation, gender identity, Indigeneity, citizenship, migrant status and experience, language, and other aspects in addition to the more frequently acknowledged aspects of race and gender. An intersectional lens can also inspire systems actors to find new ways to work across silos and re-bound problem domains because intersectionality can shine light on new opportunities and levers for change. For example, what issues are reframed and what innovations are possible when we work at the intersection of climate change, racism and gender based violence?



[There is a] deeper understanding of intersectional issues facing women with housing needs; local groups [are] learning and integrating this into their practice (e.g. immigrant serving organizations deepening understanding of 2SLBTQ women’s issues).”



In our research project on the intersection of violence and pay equity, women had the opportunity to speak openly and honestly about the detrimental effects of working for unsustainable wages and how they stayed in abusive and dangerous relationships longer because they feared not being able to support themselves and their children on their own. Minimum wage, as it stands, is not a living wage. We learned that while there are concerns about danger, fears of being alone, fears of losing a “family”, women are also pragmatic and make decisions based on the economic realities they are facing.”

14. Colin Clark, Dee Matthew & Vicki Burns. 2018. Power, privilege and justice: intersectionality as human rights? *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 22:1, 108-126.

→ Trauma informed approaches

A trauma informed approach¹⁵ takes into account the whole person and shifts from seeing people as problems to understanding the conditions that create trauma people are dealing with.

Systems change requires healing the collective trauma and violence at the root of systemic issues. Trauma informed practices and understanding were integrated into the work of gender equity initiatives at different levels depending on the strategy and tactic, especially in the initiatives addressing access to justice for survivors of gender based violence. Being trauma-informed means understanding and not judging ways people cope with difficulty but, rather, meeting people where they are at, and valuing innovative solutions such as multiple options for people using a system, and harm-reduction rather than all-or-nothing. It also reminds us that everyone has faced challenges and pain in their lives, we are all healing from something, which encourages compassion and listening in systems change work.

→ Bridging and working across difference

Feminist systems leaders are often bridge builders in that they are creating the conditions to work across differences and bridging to new sectors and communities. In the systems change field, “bridgers” are often referred to as “systempreneurs,¹⁶” those who are embedded in the incumbent system and building connections, channels of communication from the dominant system. Instead, we are paying attention to bridgers who work from community or marginalized spaces, build power there and then bridge from this social location to new communities or to dominant systems. When this happens, it creates a very different impact. New perspectives, experiences and solutions can be harnessed to create change.

The practice of bridging across culture and sectors means that feminist organizations are building collaboration across racially diverse, multi-class, Indigenous, immigrant and refugee and other diverse social and cultural communities and perspectives. This learning is an important contribution to systems change efforts and models practice that respects diverse experiences and ways of being in efforts to shift systems.

→ Valuing diverse ways of knowing

Innovation often comes from the margins. Those who are living on the front lines of harm, whether it is violence, climate change, poverty or exclusion – hold important visions, possibilities, and innovative solutions for change.

As leadership shifts from the rational, linear, command-and-control and mechanistic ways of working and knowing towards valuing the emergence and unpredictability of complex adaptive systems, there is a recognition and value of new styles of leadership. These can include relational, emergent, intuition, collaboration, sensing, embodiment and recognition of diverse ways of knowing.



Our work has been greatly impacted in terms of our thinking around allyship as a result of our partnership. While we continue to navigate how best to provide support and understanding to each other it is becoming more and more clear that one does not arrive as an ally as a final destination but as a journey to be refined and continually practiced.



From this initiative we are understanding how to support marginalized groups in ways beyond the surface level. When working with diverse women, including those who do not have experiences of marginalization, we had to address issues of privilege, ally-ship, accountability in our solidarity work.

15. Haskell, Lori and Randall, Melanie, *Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims: What the Criminal Justice System Needs to Know* (January 1, 2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3417763> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3417763>

16. *Bringing an Entrepreneurial Mindset to the World's Failing Systems* by Charmian Love and Rachel Sinha <https://hbr.org/2015/02/bringing-an-entrepreneurial-mindset-to-the-worlds-failing-systems>



Call to action: Bringing feminist approaches into other systems change work

What can people working in systems change do, to activate the knowledge and practices from feminist systems leadership? Here are several opportunities we see to infuse systems change work with wisdom and skilful practice from feminist intersectional approaches.

1 Bridge and center gender equity in systems change and innovation work

Gender issues weave through all of the social and environmental issues of the day. We believe that those who are living on the front lines of harm, whether it is violence, climate change, poverty or exclusion – hold important visions, possibilities, and innovative solutions for change. Apply an intersectional lens and center gender issues to your

focal issue to shine light on new possibilities and re-bound problem domains. For example, what issues are reframed and what systems innovations are possible when we work at the intersection of climate change, racism and gender based violence?

2 Invest in and prioritize feminist systems change initiatives

Systems change work requires long term investment, patience and perseverance. Funders of systems change must seek out and support feminist leaders and initiatives working on gender equity and other issues. We also need to keep learning,

documenting and sharing feminist approaches to systemic change, currently an under-studied and under-discussed area that could contribute to not only strategic learning in the gender equity field but also in other issue domains.

3 Move beyond inclusion to equity and solidarity

Far too often systems change and social innovation organizations, events and initiatives are dominantly white, privileged spaces with men holding power and decision making roles. Leverage feminist convening and facilitation practices to bring an equity lens to the work by asking who is invited and who is leading? Who is in front of the room, whose voices are privileged? What knowledge is valued? Who has access to and control over resources? These questions should be integrated across all systems change initiatives from inception to implementation.

4 Flow resources to the grassroots.

“Systems change” is increasingly used by many funders to define their granting criteria. Initiatives that frame themselves as systems innovation are growing their ability to mobilize resources from government and private sectors. Feminist groups and movements on the other hand have been and continue to be under-resourced. Rather than having the current rise of systems change further marginalize social justice groups, let us make sure that these resources support innovation led by grassroots mobilization and advocacy. Where our money goes shows what we value: sharing resources and channelling more resources to systems change lead from community initiatives is essential so that this important work is supported and sustained.

5 Embrace humility and the long view.

The systems change and social innovation fields can be blind to the social movements, including women’s and gender justice movements, that have brought us to today. The word innovation indicates newness and invention - yet in reality all that is being developed has benefitted from past culture shifts and practice. We need to beware of the arrogance of thinking that we invented it all. That goes for processes and tools as well as products and ideas. Achieving change quickly seems to be the goal of many change initiatives, exemplified by words like “accelerate” and “maximize” and “fail fast”. Yet there are histories reaching back decades and centuries in the struggle for a more equitable society. Having a long range view reminds us that while there is urgency to change, there is also a need to be deeply respectful and thoughtful about our strategies and how our actions might reverberate through time and across communities.



With a systemic world view, (which is also highly consistent with feminist principles), the imperative for creating mechanisms, structures and skills in collaborative action across difference becomes clearer. It embeds an expectation for working together for positive change in the system as a whole, and being strategic about where to focus energy and resources for the greatest impact. -



Conclusion

It is vital that any systems change work expose power constructs that create systems of inequity. Intersectional feminist practice has been developing ways to create spaces that acknowledge multiple layers of power while enabling contributions from everyone and acts of allyship and solidarity.

Systems change initiatives could seek out these valuable tools - and if they are applied with skill, they would help ensure that initiatives start from the right place, engage the right people (including in leadership roles) and create deeper results, saving time on efforts that fail because of power differentials.

How can feminist and gender equity organizations and movements strengthen their influence on systems change?



Building ecosystems for gender equity

How can we leverage systems change practices to advance gender equity?

Gender inequality and violence are some of the most complex issues facing our society. Their roots in patriarchy and misogyny are thousands of years in the making, deeply embedded in all the structures that govern our lives. While we have made gains over the last few decades, there is still so much work to do to move the needle on gender equity. The patterns and mindsets that keep gender based violence entrenched are institutional, socio-cultural and systemic.

Members of the gender equity groups we have been working with have expressed the need to strengthen systems change efforts together. They tell us that significant change in these dynamics cannot happen merely at the individual or even organizational level. What is clear is a need to catalyze collaboration at an ecosystem level among diverse institutions, organizations and initiatives working for change. It requires a whole system approach. This means developing competencies and opportunities to illuminate the interrelationships and interconnections of component parts as an integrated whole.

This involves convening and deepening relationships across diverse system actors, issues, sectors and geographies and support for system actors to reflect on their assumptions, values, worldview and strategies.

At this unique time when gender equality and gender-based violence are in the zeitgeist, we see opportunities to accelerate and increase impact by getting gender equity out of the margins and into the mainstream change arena. We also see ways to increase effectiveness of systems change efforts in the gender equity field.

- ➔ How might a connected and thriving ecosystem of women's organizations be created and sustained?
- ➔ What are the qualities of an effective, collaborative community of changemakers for gender equity?
- ➔ How might existing resources be leveraged to accelerate and increase impact for gender equity?



The ecosystem work is the next frontier - an absolutely essential competency for advocates and system leaders to strategically dedicate financial, human and material resources to the effort to successfully address entrenched issues of gender intersectional inequality and the structures that continue to marginalize and dismiss women's experience, knowledge, intelligence, value and contribution.



Systemic challenges for women's organizations and the gender equity field

Throughout the last three years, we have observed that many women's organizations demonstrate a level of systems change savvy, particularly their deep continuity by building on decades of feminist work calling for transformational, cultural change. Many feminist groups also have developed sophisticated approaches to inclusion and integrity in leadership. Yet, we have observed several challenges in the ecosystem of actors working towards gender equality in Canada.



"We have seen changes in child care public policy at all levels of government, however the public policy changes are not geared to making system-change. Instead they involve a few more patches to a system that is not working...This framework caps off the fact that all provinces and territories have now signed agreements with the federal government on ELCC. The agreements, while a step forward are not about systemic change, but rather on pieces of the systems... the agreements are tinkering on the edges of policy. "

Silos

Often gender equity initiatives and organizations are disconnected and working in isolation. Even those initiatives working on the same issue but in different regions, usually lack capacity to learn from and collaborate with each other. We also found that the gender field tends to be stuck in silos. Important thinking and action from the gender equity field is not connected to other issue domains, and feminist groups are often not connected to the broader systems change field. Finally, important cross sectoral work, for example on climate change or poverty reduction, usually fails to make connections to gender equity.

Resources and relationships

Women's organizations are often overstretched and exhausted. Small organizations with limited capacities are competing for limited resources, thus limiting collaborative possibility. There is also little access and connection to power centers and a lack of capacity to work with unusual suspects and new system actors. Initiatives lack resources and support to capitalize on cultural trends like #metoo - to engage timely, leveraged, savvy and collaborative communications strategies towards narrative influence. Nonetheless, feminist groups are working hard, often accomplishing a lot with limited resources.

Mindsets

We also found that some organizations are working from limiting mindsets. In some cases, organizations are stuck in outdated scarcity mindsets and therefore in competition with each other for resources. Some organizations are trapped by logic models and limitations driven by funders, either unable to accept that systems change work must be responsive and emergent or fearful to be honest and up front with partners and funders about the changing needs of their projects. In some cases, organizations do not have the openness or capacity to learn new approaches to effecting change.



We are too under-resourced. Our organizational infrastructure is too weak. If we were stronger our initiative would be stronger. We are seeking other sources of revenue and assistance.



AS ONE LEADER FROM NOVA SCOTIA, DESCRIBES:

Without an ecosystem view we may inadvertently work at cross purposes or squander precious resources in duplication out of ignorance of who else is doing similar work.

During our convening we saw that there was genuine enthusiasm for learning and connecting, as well as recognizing the gaps in our networks; an energy for going deeper, acknowledging that more intentional connection and collaboration is the key to change.

With a systemic world view, (which is also highly consistent with feminist principles), the imperative for creating mechanisms, structures and skills in collaborative action across difference becomes clearer. It embeds an expectation for working together for positive change in the system as a whole, and being strategic about where to focus energy and resources for the greatest impact. - Sue Bookchin, Be The Peace



Ecosystem building: Pathways for systems change learning and collaboration

→ What is an ecosystem initiative?

An ecosystem, in social innovation terms, is an initiative that nurtures multiple interconnected system actors, organizations and initiatives at the same time, working at different levels of a system, to create the conditions for change.¹⁷

Projects typically hosted by ecosystems include change labs that convene cohorts of system actors to nurture learning and collaboration across the system, new networks or coalitions that create communities of practice and catalyze new collaborations to understand, see and act in the system differently, accelerator projects supporting new business models in the system, coalitions driving for policy change and campaigns to shift negative stories, stereotypes of stigma that get in the way of changing hearts and minds.

These ecosystems are often called for when a system actor (funder, foundation, nonprofit organization or community) sees a need for either:

- ➔ **Increased connections for systems change:** There is a need for connection among system actors doing promising things but not yet in relationship. Here the Theory of Change is: if we connect the system better, break down

silos, connect the people doing amazing work to encourage and resource them, connect the groups in need with those who can support, then we can facilitate positive change in the system.

- ➔ **Advancing solutions that would not work without collaboration:** There is a need for system actors to work together to work on tricky systemic issues they could never shift alone. The Theory of Change in this case is: what we're doing currently isn't working. Yet there are major policies and practices that need to change, narratives that need to shift, and alternatives that need significant collaboration and investment to have a real impact.

There are many ways to build systems change and ecosystem initiatives. Structures and methodologies can range from networks, coalitions, to platforms, accelerators, field building or innovation labs. Based on our research and experience with collaborative gender equity initiatives, we have determined some key design principles when creating and implementing systems change supports to advance gender equity. This section provides our recommendations for more effective system change strategies and implementation to advance gender equity.

→ Healthy Ecosystems

Our experience tells us that successful ecosystems connect on a regular basis with people engaged in a shared commitment to shift a system. Within these ecosystems there is time for collective reflection, inquiry, sense making, sharing of challenges and exchange across participant experiences. There is a clear process for capturing and sharing learning; the community builds learning into every single experience in a

structured way, that feeds back into their work and the broader field. People engaged in these ecosystems are working across sectors and silos and accessing new resources and partners. Participants actively seek out collaboration with each other because they have built trust and understanding. They have capacity to work systemically and continue to learn together and grow.¹⁸

17. SiG and Oxfam (2014), *Building Ecosystems for Systems Change*. <http://www.sigeneration.ca/ecosystems-systems-change/>

18. *Building Healthy Ecosystems for Positive Change*, by Tatiana Fraser & Rachel Sinha (2020)



What is needed for feminist and gender equity initiatives to strengthen their influence on systems change?

Systems change work is hard. We know that it requires long term commitment and strategic savvy as well as new approaches to leadership and collaboration. We also believe that to truly advance gender equality, the whole ecosystem of change actors and processes needs support and increased capacity - not just individual organizations or projects.

We are building off of the insights from the diverse gender equity groups we have worked with and the other system actors working in their fields. We asked these key informants: what does the ecosystem need now, in order to bring about the changes sought for gender equality? Their answers reflected a desire to go further, to expand beyond the limitations we described above and create deep, meaningful connections among parts of the system.



It is a 'long game' view. But it is important to notice and mark the milestones that are being achieved and mine those experiences for the facilitating factors, the learnings, how to sustain positive intent, activity and impact, and to connect the dots across the system so people don't forget that they are not alone, that they have allies, that we can support one another in good efforts and critical analysis based in curiosity and the best outcomes for all, not just a privileged few.

1 Support for ecosystem infrastructure

Women's organizations we have been working with have expressed the need to strengthen systems change efforts together. There is great potential to catalyze collaboration at an ecosystem level to expand impact on gender equity and other issues. Key informants noted that there is a need for more strategic planning and continuity in ecosystem level

convening. Many organizations may be working towards gender equity, but there is a lack of coordination to ensure that there are fewer gaps and overlaps. There are many good ideas, pilots and pockets of innovation happening but a lack of infrastructure for identifying priorities and growing what has promise or potential.

2 Leverage and invest more resources to increase impact across gender equity initiatives.

Women's organizations and leaders are working hard and smart, but they lack the resources and support to fully take advantage of the current moment and leverage windows of opportunity to effect change at the systems level. We see opportunities to broker relationships with new partners and

fundors in order to strengthen access to new resources and support for systems change work in the gender equity field. Gender equity work remains siloed both in practice and in funding.

3 Build opportunities for peer learning between different actors in the ecosystem

Peer learning builds strength, breaks feelings of isolation and is a catalyst for collaboration. Strategic connection across initiatives creates a rich opportunity to learn from one another, to share resources, models, successes and practices, as well to build relationships that can lead to strategy

development and collaboration. Many of the women leaders we have collaborated with have reflected on the importance of peer-to-peer allyship among women, of relationship, connection, and community.

4 Strengthen systems leadership in the gender equity field: Build capacity and training for gender equity organizations

We believe that building the skills of gender equity groups in systems change practice and approaches can help get gender work out of the margins and into the center. Gender equity groups have for so long seen their work as on the outside looking in. We have seen how tools like systems mapping empower feminist groups to centre women with lived experience in the system they aim to impact, which in turn shifts their strategies. This conceptual re-organization can be powerful.

Some of the skills and capacities that we identify as needs and opportunities for specific and ongoing training (through workshops, online learning and in person meetings) include:

- how to work with 'unusual suspects'/ inhabitual partners
- influencing narratives within and across issue domains
- understanding and working with complexity
- shifting from scarcity to abundance
- systems mapping to identify opportunities and levers
- skills in deep collaboration and working across difference
- navigating power
- adaptive leadership skills.



"We need a space where we can be ourselves, where we can get support".

"We need to harness the power that we have by coming together."

5 Design for wider ecosystem engagement

We learned about how co-applicants worked together in partnership and about how they engaged with other system actors.

Initiatives took up convening and brokering roles during these projects and stretched to engage to work with unusual suspects.

However, It is also important to provide more resources to engage other system actors (beyond partners) in learning, collaborative and capacity building efforts. Other system actors can include:

- allies within mainstream institutions (feminists are everywhere!)
- corporate sector actors
- levels of government
- public service system actors working on intersecting issues
- communications and marketing professionals
- groups working in arts and culture
- men who support gender equity

6 Create conditions for mindset shifts among feminist and gender equity leaders and system actors

We know that gender equity groups work with limited time and resources. Yet, systems change strategy requires taking time to reflect, learn and engage on personal and systemic levels in order to effect change on cultural mindsets, values and beliefs.

It is important to design approaches that create and value space for collective reflection. This should include face to face gatherings and facilitation of reflective practices.

7 Convene initiatives across issues at national and regional levels

Grassroots and provincial gender equity initiatives across the country lack connection to one another and capacity to leverage each other's work for the greater good. Strategic connection across initiatives creates a rich opportunity to learn from one another, to share resources, models, successes and practices, as well to build relationships that can lead to strategy development and collaboration.

In addition, initiatives working on seemingly different issues such as housing and pay equity can benefit from exchange, learning from one another and collaboration. An intersectional lens can inspire new ways to work across silos and re-bound problem domains, shining light on new opportunities and levers for change.

8 Long term investment

Systems change is a marathon not a sprint. Investments in change strategies need to have a longer time horizon. There was an overwhelming sense that they have momentum and need sustained resources to continue. It is essential for ongoing

support for women with lived experience and grassroots initiatives to build their voice, capacity, deepen relationships and role in the ecosystem.

Key conditions for successful systems change learning and collaboration

→ Timing and alignment:

In a collective process, initiatives require time for partners and stakeholders to convene, build relationships, develop shared vision and determine the process for engagement. This preparation phase is important and must be facilitated before action plans and outcomes are determined.

→ Room for emergence:

Traditional project structures are linear in planning and logic model development. Systems change program design should take into consideration the need for emergent and responsive strategy.

→ Readiness:

Certain system actors, including gender equity organizations and leaders, will be more 'ready' and open to system thinking and practice than others. There is a need for leaders to have buy in to systems and collective approaches, keeping in mind that this leadership in turn needs to engage other actors and 'bring people along.'

However, we have observed here can be resistance, for example, when traditional policy advocacy is the preferred strategy or where scarcity mindsets (such as competition for funding) and entrenched silos of gender equity work create barriers to collaboration. It is important to consider criteria

for readiness in terms of who is engaged in ecosystem initiatives and systems leadership programs, such as:

- demonstration of a desire to expand their systems change leadership capacity,
- willingness to share learning,
- capacity for convening,
- willingness to work with others, and
- ability to bridge across differences.



Conclusion

We are inspired by the creative possibilities for impact and learning that emerges when we bridge and also bring systems change and intersectional feminist practice into alignment. Both in terms of how these lenses can work together as well as by how the knowledge and wisdom inherent in these fields can serve to strengthen each other's respective efforts to shift unhealthy systems.

Our next steps include piloting a learning lab in Nova Scotia Canada in partnership with Be The Peace Institute. This learning lab will convene ecosystem leaders with the aim to shift systems and culture working at the intersections of domestic violence.

The learning lab will bring together a cohort of systems leaders over 18 months. The Sanctuary learning labs are designed to:



ECOSYSTEM COHORTS: Convene cohorts at different regions and scales



COLLABORATIVE:
Create in partnership
with system leaders



CATALYZING:
System level action
& collaboration



INTERSECTIONAL:
Gender lens @
intersections



LEARNING:
Peer learning across the
ecosystem to surface real
time challenges and learning



TRAINING:
Capacity building for
systems leadership



Systems Sanctuary holds space for collective learning around systems change.

We coach individuals, teams and ecosystems internationally, who are trying to shift unhealthy systems.

Specifically we work with systems practitioners who are experimenting with systemic interventions, and women leading systems change.

We speak, teach, host virtual peer-learning programs, we coach teams and individuals.

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