metalab

SHIFTING POWER = SHIFTING SYSTEMS STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Key insights part way through a 3-year
learning journey with gender equity initiatives across Canada

This learning process is a three-year initiative funded through the Department for Women and Gender Equality (WAGE; formerly Status of Women Canada), 2017 to 2019. The process is aimed to evaluate the systems change impact and support learning with eight collaborative gender equity initiatives across Canada.

GOALS

Understand the systemic impact of the initiatives as a whole and at a Cluster level

Contribute to strategic learning to inform systems change to advance gender equity

PARTICIPATING INITIATIVES

The cohort includes three local-level, four provincial and one national scale collective impact initiative, all funded by the **Department for Women and Gender Equality.** WAGE has grouped the initiatives into three Clusters by issue area:

- Access to Housing

- Access to Justice

- Economic Preconditions for Success (pay equity & childcare)

DESIGN

Our design of the evaluation and learning process draws 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 is both grounded in the realities of gender equity organizations and making use of innovative systems change theory and tools.

YEAR 1
2017

Year One, 2017, was focused on development of an overall evaluation framework, developing and piloting evaluation tools, communications and relationship-building with the initiatives as well as collecting and analyzing initial results.

YEAR 2
2018

Year Two, 2018, was focused on gathering data and learning as well as facilitating peer learning, coaching sessions, and site visits.

STRATEGIC LEARNING 2017-2018

This summary report is focused on the strategic learning component of the evaluation. It describes key practices, approaches and lessons learned about how gender equity organizations are doing systems change.

Our analysis is based on outcomes and Strategy Journals completed by the eight initiatives (two journals completed each year), peer learning sessions (two annually per Cluster), as well as one to one coaching sessions and site visits with the initiatives.

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

We were guided in the analysis by these questions:

1 What are the different relationship building tactics used by the initiatives? What are the impacts of different approaches to engaging system actors? Are relationships broadening and deepening with unusual suspects?

2 How are initiatives influencing the landscape and cultural narratives in their respective systems? What are the strengths and weaknesses here?

3 What is unique about feminist systems change practice? What patterns do we see here?

4 How can systems change initiatives for gender equity accelerate and deepen impact?

EMERGING CHANGE THEORY: SHIFTING POWER BY SCALING DEEP

One of the key patterns we have observed in the initiatives is that "scaling deep" is central to their change strategies. While scaling out includes replicating successful models and approaches in new places and scaling up is influencing policy and structural change, a key condition for success is moving beyond these traditional forms of strategy.

> **Scaling deep involves bringing about change at the cultural and individual level including shifting mindsets, perceptions, cultural practices, habits and values.**

The initiatives are addressing this need to shift culture and values through three main strategies :
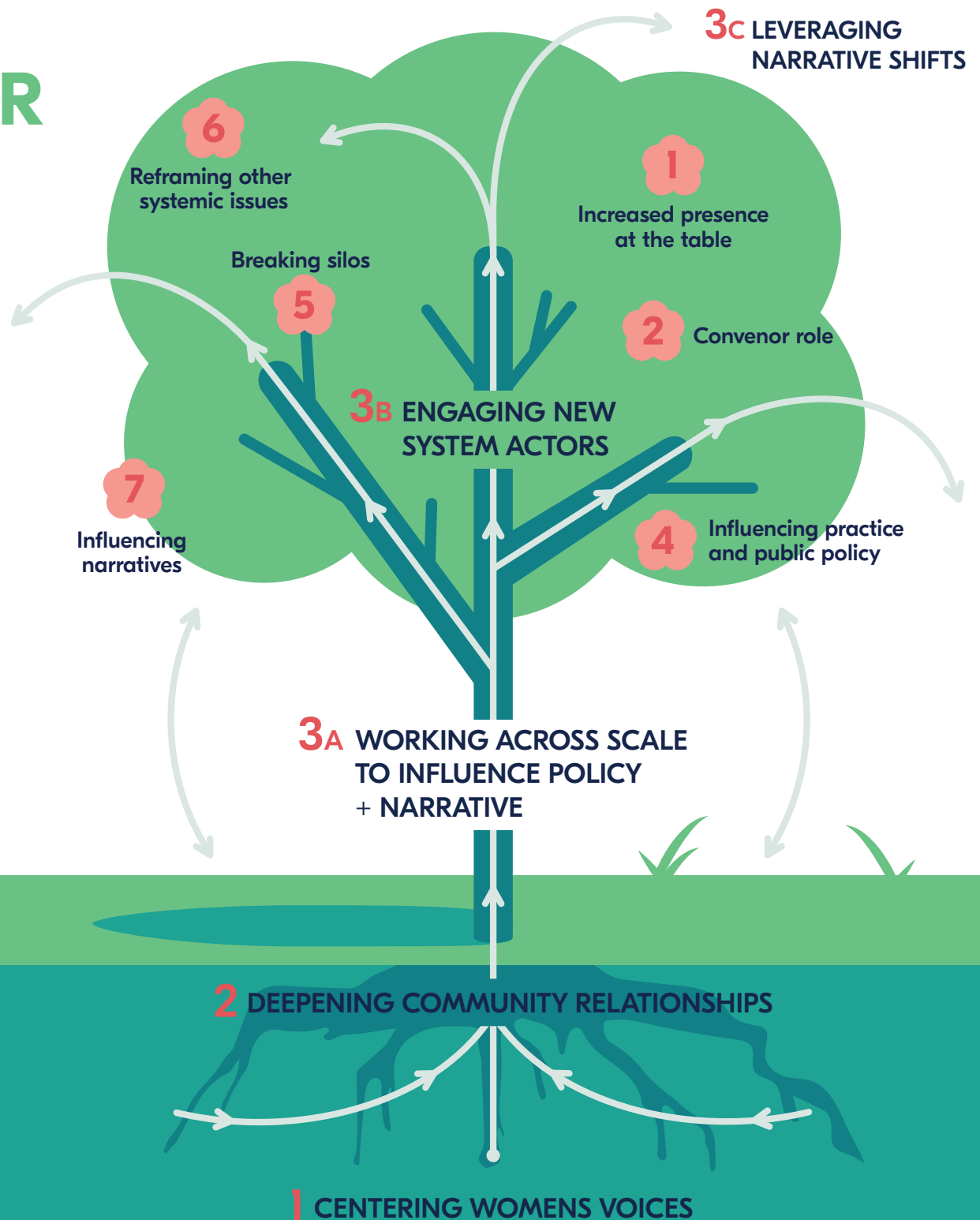
1
Focus on "first voice", or the engagement of women with direct, lived experience.

2
Strengthening relationship across core partners and community organizations.

3
Building from women's lived experiences to influence policy, practice and new narratives.

THESE STRATEGIES WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE A UNIQUE SYSTEMS CHANGE FRAMEWORK.

We often see systems change interventions attempt to address dominant powers directly by trying to engage from the centre of the system. Many of the gender equity initiatives in this cohort are putting more focus at the level of grassroots networks and women's organizations. They are also privileging the voices and expertise of women who are often left out - those who are directly affected by the issue. This approach to systems change 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. This is an important observation as the approach to this project is unique and we will continue to track this impact and learning.

According to emergent strategy, patterns that occur at small scales through individual interactions influence and create patterns at the next level; organizational, systemic and cultural. The signalling and interaction at one scale creates patterns at next scale. There is an inter-relatedness and interaction between scales: we are influenced and are shaped and we influence and shape.

> **By scaling deep, the initiatives are shifting the power centre of gravity. This creates the space to establish new norms and to experiment with approaches to doing things differently, outside of dominant cultures and systems.**

SHIFTING POWER THROUGH SCALING DEEP

3c LEVERAGING NARRATIVE SHIFTS

6 Reframing other systemic issues

1 Increased presence at the table

Breaking silos

5

2 Convenor role

3b ENGAGING NEW SYSTEM ACTORS

7 Influencing narratives

4 Influencing practice and public policy

3a WORKING ACROSS SCALE TO INFLUENCE POLICY + NARRATIVE

2 DEEPENING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

1 CENTERING WOMENS VOICES

TACTICS

In this section, we present observations on systems change tactics that initiatives are using. There is learning to be drawn from both their successes and their challenges influencing systems.

1 CENTERING 'FIRST VOICE' = CLAIMING POWER

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. The needs assessments conducted by initiatives during the early phase of their projects has been important research for action that provided new information and understanding of barriers, complexity and diversity. The consultations and engagement of women with lived experience has proven to have a positive impact for them, providing platforms to share experiences and have a voice.

2 DEEPENING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS = SHIFTING POWER CENTRE OF GRAVITY

By supporting diverse women's organizations to collaborate and work together in new ways, initiatives are able to leverage others' strengths and make strategic interventions in ways they could not do alone. We observe that there is strategic value in the initiatives' core practices at the local level. These include listening to and supporting the leadership of 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.

3A A WORKING ACROSS SCALE TO INFLUENCE PRACTICE, POLICY AND NARRATIVE = MULTIPLE POINTS OF INTERVENTION

Initiatives that are working to influence change at multiple levels, appear to be making the most impact. Multi-level action strategies usually involve working across different scales. Some initiatives are using 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.

3B ENGAGING WITH NEW SYSTEM ACTORS

Initiatives are engaged in efforts to both deepen and broaden engagement with system actors. This includes work to influence the hearts and minds of more people as well as strategic relationship building to prepare the ground and build bridges to policy influence. Some initiatives are testing and trying out different ways of convening and relationship building. Many initiatives report how certain mainstream system actors, who would not have been their usual collaborators, have been open and eager to work with them.

3C LEVERAGING NARRATIVE SHIFTS

Initiatives have responded to shifts in public discourse and societal narratives about gender equality in various ways. Some initiatives are riding the wave, benefitting from the increased attention and openness to gender equity in the landscape. Some initiatives are bringing narrative influence capacity to maximize this wave.

To influence narratives and mindsets related to their focal issues, initiatives are applying a number of innovative and effective tactics. Some initiatives have used simple key messages that could be easily picked up by system actors and the public. The repetition of key messages in many different venues and through different channels seems to have created a sense of "inevitability" of change in some initiatives. Other tactics include generating debate during provincial elections, partnering with people with voice in the system to craft messages, and using public opinion survey results to reinforce the key messages of the initiative. A number of initiatives have 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.

We provide a model that illustrates the interrelations between these systems change practices.

IMPACT: EMERGING INFLUENCE AND CHANGE

Increasingly, other system actors are looking to women's organizations as experts and seeking their assistance. The gender equity field is being reached out to, raising in prominence, as the environment it operates within becomes more conscious of gender inequity and more motivated to act in response. They are adding value by bringing important perspectives and systems analysis that had previously not been has highly valued.

This presents the opportunity to lead. Stepping into this leadership space builds momentum and acts as a magnet to other system actors who are starting to see the systemic gaps. Some organizations perceive this trend as an opportunity for service offering and for generating revenue.

They are increasingly being asked to contribute. This shows up in a number of ways:

1 INCREASED PRESENCE AT DECISION MAKING TABLES

Many initiatives have 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.

2 CONVENOR ROLE

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

3 BRINGING GENDER FRAMEWORKS TO NEW PLACES

A number of initiatives are bringing 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 play a guiding role for other system actors regarding new and improved practices.

4 INFLUENCING PRACTICE AND PUBLIC POLICY

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

5 BREAKING SILOS

System actors are increasingly responsive to the feminist practice of reframing issues to take into account their intersectionality, interconnection and complexity. This creates opportunities for new collaborations and strengthens the possibility of work across silos. Silos are being 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 have had a positive influence on organizations and institutions in their respective systems so that communication lines and coordination are improving among them.

6 REFRAMING SYSTEMIC ISSUES:

Most initiatives have paid attention to the way their focal issue is framed in public and policy discourse and have had some success influencing the way the issue is 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.

7 INFLUENCING THE NARRATIVE:

We also observe that the stories emerging from first voice experience are influencing system actors and high-level narratives. Key messages and concepts about the issues promoted by women's organizations are gaining traction in popular discourse and in media as well as among other system actors.

CHALLENGES

LACK OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

It is important to note that many initiatives would be doing more if they had additional resources. Gender equity organizations and initiatives are stretched and often exhausted. Their choice of systems change tactics is influenced by their strategic outlook, leadership approaches and concepts about how to influence systems change, but initiatives are also constrained by a lack of financial resources which limits the human resources they can dedicate to the work. Many of the promising systems change strategies we identified (such as intensive relationship building and influencing cultural narratives) require significant resources.

DOMINANT NARRATIVES

Many initiatives take an intersectional approach to their work and are focusing on deepening and strengthening understanding of diverse experiences. While this is the case, the initiatives are running up against dominant narratives that tend to center whiteness. For example, while the #MeToo movement has been a critical current to advance the Access to Justice initiatives, it also reinforces an exclusionary narrative, as one initiative stated: "dialogues are still taking place in very heteronormative, cisnormative, ableist circumstances, cloaked in whiteness."

GENDER STILL SILOED

We have observed of the ecosystem of women's organizations in Canada that initiatives and organizations are often still disconnected and working in isolation. Projects may be tackling similar issues in different regions, but they lack capacity to learn from and collaborate with colleagues working to effect the same change. In addition, women's organizations often lack access and connection to power centers and capacity to work with unusual suspects and new system actors.

MOVING FORWARD

1 How can a connected and thriving ecosystem of women's organizations be created and sustained?

2 How can existing resources be leveraged to accelerate and increase impact for gender equity?

3 How can those working for gender equity be more coordinated and strategic at the landscape level?