# WE SEE YOU TOO.

**Reflections from The Systems Sanctuary's,**
*The Systems Sisterhood*

THE
SYSTEMS
SANCTUARY

# The Marvelous Women
## by Mohja Kahf

All women speak two languages:
the language of men
and the language of silent suffering.
Some women speak a third,
the language of queens.
They are marvelous
and they are my friends.

My friends give me poetry.
If it were not for them
I'd be a seamstress out of work.
They send me their dresses
and I sew together poems,
enormous sails for ocean journeys.

My marvelous friends, these women
who are elegant and fix engines,
who teach gynecology and literacy,
and work in jails and sing and sculpt
and paint the ninety-nine names,
who keep each other's secrets
and pass on each other's spirits
like small packets of leavening,

it is from you I fashion poetry.
I scoop up, in handfuls, glittering
sequins that fall from your bodies
as you fall in love, marry, divorce,
get custody, get cats, enter
supreme courts of justice,
argue with God.

You rescuers on galloping steeds
of the weak and the wounded–
Creatures of beauty and passion,
powerful workers in love–
you are the poems.
I am only your stenographer.
I am the hungry transcriber
of the conjuring recipes you hoard
in the chests of your great-
grandmothers.

My marvelous friends–the women
of brilliance in my life,
who levitate my daughters,
you are a coat of many colors
in silk tie-dye so gossamer
it can be crumpled in one hand.
You houris, you mermaids, swimmers
in dangerous waters, defiers of sharks–

My marvelous friends,
thirsty Hagars and laughing Sarahs,
you eloquent radio Aishas,
Marys drinking the secret
milkshakes of heaven,
slinky Zuleikas of desire
, gay Walladas, Harriets
parting the sea, Esthers in the palace,
Penelopes of patient scheming,

you are the last hope of the shrinking
women.
You are the last hand to the fallen
knights
You are the only epics left in the world

Come with me, come with poetry
Jump on this wild chariot, hurry–

# OVERALL

Over the last year, we have been convening a cohort of 25 women from the US, UK, Australia and Canada for a collective inquiry into emerging leadership for systems change. We are ready to share the gold nuggets that jumped out from that conversation.

The Systems Sisterhood has been a place to find camaraderie and support for women working in systems change who are in the middle of a 'life transition'. Transitions include stepping down from a leadership role, becoming a leader for the first time, taking time out to look after children, or relatives, going through change at home, shifting into eldership, or simply feeling called to dig deeper into your sense of purpose.

This has been a place for collective inquiry about the challenges and opportunities that emerge for women system leaders.

We explored themes that cut across gender justice, transitions and systems change. We shared new frames, dug into questions about life priorities, sharing practices to support embracing the unknown.

We know the personal dynamics of change are connected to the systems we are working to shift. Many of these systems are entrenched in patriarchal structures, dominance and exploitation.

We also know that new ways of being, working together and leading are needed now more than ever. Our hope was that the Sisterhood creates a space to learn about, strengthen and support women's leadership for systems change.

As we reach a close of the first ever Systems Sisterhood Group, we took time to write down and make sense of some of the key themes that burst forth during our 7 month discussions.

The Systems Sisterhood was launched in March 2018, the second program from our Systems Sanctuary, a new platform of support for systems leaders. When selecting participants, we were looking for people who were working on or interested in creating systemic change, whether or not this was with their current organization. They had to be going through some kind of personal transition and the invitation was for a diverse group of international participants. 25 plus participants joined us for the inaugural group from countries including Canada, the US, the UK and Australia.

We met virtually by video conference once per month, in groups of up to seven people.

We used peer learning methods to identify strategic challenges, surface the collective wisdom of the group, and gather emergent themes through direct inquiry and exchange. The program ran for seven months, concluding in March

We wanted to mark the conclusion of our first group with a summary of some of the most interesting patterns and insights that emerged from our discussions. We recorded and transcribed all of our Cohort sessions as we went along, noting patterns, pulling out pertinent quotes, reflections and insights. We organized all of this learning into themes, culminating in this document.

This reflective article is designed to be an offering to the participants themselves, who took a leap of faith in us and brought an openness and good natured curiosity that we could not have predicted. We also offer this to the wider field of systems change practice.

# GENDER AND SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP: MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

We facilitated our inquiry through a gender lens. This meant that we made connections between our personal experiences and the systemic issues we are working in and a part of. There is work to do on all of these fronts and we look forward to continuing the learning into many of these themes in our upcoming deep dive series. Here are some of the issues we surfaced:

# 1. Being disruptive as a woman

Disruption is required for innovation and the conditions for systems change, but it is often not appreciated and met with resistance, disapproval and punishment when it is instigated. The women on our calls talked a great deal about this paradox.

*These organizations ask us to be a contrarian to bring an alternative perspective,  but they are not acknowledging that they're asking this of me.*

*We're hired to do something different, but when they're pushed, they don't want us to do it.*

*So often we're bringing systems thinking in a culture that thrives on fragmentation.*

*When I'm with these large organizations, this is where I experience the challenge. You knew what I was about when you hired me, and you let me down.*

*There is a membrane around the leadership that determines which viable systemic change is possible. It can feel like there is more chance of change than there is.*

*How can I bring practices which they say they want, but are not actually doing? There's a real misunderstanding about what this work means.*

*Pushing on the system, there is always a push back. A closing down rather than opening up.*

*The work of the systems leaders is to work through the pain of being a disruptor.*

*I realized I was resisting the resistance that people had. In my mind, it took me time to realize the resistance to resistance, was the real work.*

*If we can identify what wants to be conserved. What is the status quo protecting? When we understand that better, it opens up better pathways.*

*If you can't speak to power, you have to challenge yourself and go deeper.*

*Build the courage by remembering the wo we're doing is huge and necessary.*

Disruption led by women comes with its own baggage that is gendered. For women, being disruptive goes against the cultural norms and stereotypes of what it means to be "good", "nice" and people pleasing.  Not to rock the boat. The fear and consequences are very real for disrupting systems at home, in our work and the systems we are trying to change. For marginalized women who are disruptors, the cost and consequence can be high, especially when health, bodies and safety are at stake.

We heard stories of women who disrupted the status quo and lost their jobs or had to leave organizations. Many of the inquiries were centred around how to work in cultures that were outdated, patriarchal, or misaligned with the change they were intending to create. In many cases, these system leaders were embedded in highly structured and large institutions and cultures that placed high value on hierarchy, academic rigour, reductionist thinking and fast paced work.

Women leaders who held positions of authority could also be blocks towards change and presented as much of a challenge to change as men in positions of power. Some provocative thoughts on gender and being disruptive at work:

*I feel the backlash of #metoo, either real or potential. It's in our bones to be careful. There's an ancient story of why the feminine has gone underground.*

*I find myself in that disruptor role and it doesn't go with the accommodating 'good' roles we play.*

*Disruption is not valued when it comes from women. Can you unpack - what might be your internal resistance to creating discomfort?*

*In these well known organizations, women are stopping the change all the time. I'm seeing this happen so much... These women have risen to the top. We have to look at ourselves first.*

*Women to women that's interesting and uncomfortable. Society tells us we're not meant to come to heads, we need to get more comfortable with being at odds with each other.*

*I've worked with men who lead with feminine energy and that seems to be a block too.*

*There is a popular discourse around gender. I wonder how much we lose when we can't appreciate there isn't a binary?*

*The way foundations and not-for-profits are setup is not conducive to how women want to work.*

*What is the resistance of women in power positions?*

*We have lots of very educated people in our organization. It's hard to give up the power that comes with academic power and language.*

*Being good at playing into the masculine then thinking oh sh\*t, why didn't I just bring myself in more? The more my personal practice is active the better I'm able to do this.*

*For the first time young women are not looking to men for mentorship, looking to older women. Not trying to get access to power through men, looking to older women.*

*I think there are too many women who put on a smile and think they'll deal with it. The internalization of the goblins can lead to further systemic issues. We need to stop eating the goblins!*

# 2. Health & burn-out

Health was a major issue and we made connections between our personal health and the system change work we do. Within this is an invitation to do things differently in a really powerful way.

Many participants brought up the challenges of health including burn out, illness, stress and exhaustion.

As a social innovator there's no question about how stress is associated with being on the front edge of the curve of change. The pressures to work and achieve at all costs and drive to succeed coupled with a fast paced competitive innovation culture creates high stress environments that wreak havoc on health.

Unfair compensation, unreasonable workloads and too much overtime lead to burnout and are "normal" conditions in startups, entrepreneurial endeavors and in established organizations.

For systems leaders, the workload and stress expands as you are involved in multiple interventions for change at once.

Building in time for self care is challenging and an often neglected part of systems change work.

Often our Sisterhood participants felt a lack of institutional support for realities such as wellbeing, family, single parenting and they identified a need for innovative policies, for example, flex days to accommodate juggling childcare and work or to have travel expenses including childcare covered when work demands travel.

This all doubles down for women - who do 2 to 10 times more unpaid labor than men, in spite of being 40-70% of paid labor force work and then face gender specific barriers to support for their leadership and work that continue to leave them under-resourced in business and innovation as entrepreneurs and underrepresented in leadership positions across the board.

*"My body is of service as a changemaker."*

Participant, The Systems Sisterhood

*It's almost like a mania. Go to the highest heights of excitement and crashing down because you're by yourself.*

*My body can't handle it. My body is of service as a changemaker. My condition is advancing. It affects the quality of my life. My question is why am I not putting it first?*

*There's a significant link between loneliness and exhaustion. A sense of being on our own.*

*What you would lose by putting your health first? Isolation.*

*What colonization of the mind requires a woman to put her body at the forefront of change? How can we help deconstruct this and help younger women not get on this path?*

*Why do we feel so exhausted? These are hard changes, internal influencing in an influential organization. Struck by where's the space for self-care and compassion?*

*Autoimmune disorders were linked to women suppressing their truth. Autoimmune disorders are very common in the black community.*

*Physical limitations enhance my abilities, there's a vulnerability and deep empathy and humility, and something uniquely gendered in it.*

*Organizations become microcosms of toxicity of the people who lead them.The aggregate of the mental health issues within an organization becomes its culture.*

*What's enough? Reframing what's enough, what success is. It takes a different paradigm to say "I'm going to work less".*

# 3. Money

Money is a taboo subject and difficult to talk about. Its a theme that also came up in many different ways. How can we be better at growing, asking for and negotiating finances? How does taboo and shame prevent positive flow of resources? What does wealth mean to me?

Like women entrepreneurs in business who face greater barriers securing capital investments than men, female system entrepreneurs appear to have a harder time generating funds for their work. We also know that male led innovations scale up more than women led initiatives. What gender specific challenges exist that are not named or acknowledged? What are our assumptions about how we define success?

Systems leadership is risky in that it is a delicate balance of following your gut and creating new initiatives that often push the edges of conventional and acceptable roles and ways of working. This combined with the fact that women are supported and financed less than male led entrepreneurs means that economic precarity is a reality.

Establishing our value in the market is a challenge. When our work is about social and environmental outcomes, how much is too much to ask? How do we balance valuing our experience and contribution, sustaining ourselves to keep doing the work we are passionate about and setting a fair price? This is murky water, not often discussed.

Money is a challenge when in transition. Many system entrepreneurs do not have the luxury of full time employment and need to balance portfolio engagements to buy time to invest in their creative ideas and innovative leadership.

Money is also about system change. How can we re-frame money to serve our work and our visions. How do I build a positive relationship with money?

Some provocative statements about money;

*There's something destabilizing and disconcerting about losing or not having a job. My sense of worth and ability to contribute.*

*All the work I do to earn money takes my attention away from the work I care about and want to do.*

*We need better policies about women who travel. Every time I travel I have an economic hit paying for childcare.*

*It's a very real thing when you talk about money, especially as women and women of colour, to talk about our passions and our dreams. The courage it takes to walk away from things and have no money.*

*There's a way that rich people look at money in a way that is more about strategy and beneficial maneuvers than self-worth.*

*We need other ways of thinking about money that focus on being human. Other ways to think about what money means in service of you as a human.*

*There's a distinction between wealth and money - what does wealth mean to me? family, friends, play, health, love. Money is just a means to get that wealth.*

*Yes we can go into creative spaces, but we need to make money too.*

*"What is my relationship with money? I should treat it as a relationship. How do I make it better or more loving?"*

Participant, The Systems Sisterhood

# 4. Redefining gender norms

In many of our conversations, participants shared the experiences of coming up against limits of gender stereotypes, roles and expectations. We face this challenge in our roles as daughters, partners, parents, aunties and elders, workers and leaders.

Often the women on our calls were innovating and redefining gender norms. This was a practical issue because the demands placed upon them were simply too much. We saw this issue cut across stage of life; women do most of the emotional, care and domestic labour in heterosexual relationships and families, older women can become invisible and devalued and parenting asks women to negotiate career priorities.

We reflected on how cultural norms and gender binaries create internalized assumptions, challenges and an opportunity to 'do things differently' and how we learn from gender fluid approaches and the many ways families are challenging assumptions around gender stereotypes.

The systems we live in often do not acknowledge the many parts of who we are and some parts of us can inevitably get silenced or forgotten. This thread was a search for authenticity to transcend the cultural expectations that define us and give us limited identities.  Who we are interacts with the system, and we are both shapers and shaped by culture. In many cases, we change culture by being authentic and by speaking up when unequal demands are handed to us.

*I want a marriage I've never seen before and I don't even know if it exists. I'm interested in internal mastery not a career. I'm parenting in a way I never saw parenting.*

*How do I hold and create partnership in my marriage and working relationships?*

*The project of redefining relationships is lifelong.*

*Sometimes I feel like I just want to give it up. When it's going well its great, when it's not, I feel like the loneliness comes in.*

*It hasn't always been easy, when your not accepting the norms of relationships, we have to do relationships differently in order to stay in love.*

*Take off the role and put it back on. Take off the role of mother and do you still love each other?*

*My identity was shaped around the way the system was currently working. One way to relate that to systems change work is to shape it in a different framework. One not based on current expectations.*

*What would it look like if we had been brought up in a system that wasn't afraid of women leading?*

*I feel a sense of lack of integration. Disconnect between how I feel at home and juggling demands of family and kids and being in these inspirational spaces.*

*Leaning in doesn't work for everyone. As a woman in color, leaning in can be dangerous.*

# 5. Intersectional and equity lens

We use an equity and feminist frame to understand systems of inequity and how they are embedded in history, culture and identity. Practically this means centering the experience of people with lived experience and valuing different ways of knowing. It's about creating the conditions to work across difference, prioritizing diverse experiences and inclusion and, reflecting on power dynamics to understand challenges and opportunities. Finally it's also about integrating learning in order to advance understanding and action on equity.

*What amplifies the shadow systems? That's where the power lies for change.*

*I realized how important it is to identify the biases and values we have in this work.*

*Recognizing ourselves as systems change is so important.*

We took a deep dive into how systems change work (in a North American context) requires whiteness to be decentred. We also reflected on the systems change landscape and how issues of social justice that are disrupting the status quo and are a call to action.

*How can we better support growing that capacity, making it visible, shining a light on it?*

*Patriarchy and white supremacy is so embedded in all our traditional power structures, we are witnessing an unraveling of our institutions as we know them now.*

*We need to set conditions for deep relationships to weather the waters together in ways that haven't been done before.*

As systems leaders, this also meant paying attention to power, shadow systems, and making the connection between who we are in the system and how that impacts our systems change work. By recognizing intersections across race, class, gender, sexual identity and impacts of colonization and systemic discrimination, we explored how systems change work risks perpetuating harm by recreating dominant systems.

We discussed how system leaders can create the spaces and the condition for deep listening and relationship building, truth telling, vulnerability, recognition of historical trauma, in order to create the conditions to work across difference. We also discussed how the power of female elders can help hold a sacred space and guide process for these difficult conversations.

# STRENGTHENING NEW LEADERSHIP

Among this group were published authors, established thought leaders, successful consultants, and senior leaders in positions of authority within influential organizations. They were stepping up to become leaders or had worked in powerful roles creating positive disruption. They were certainly not lacking in credentials and yet what emerged was another set of skills that the group said they rarely felt comfortable to name and to share. These magic powers were on top of the strategy frameworks and mapping tools.

*"Where on that dial do I have to be?
When do I need to be fierce, and
when do I have to be gentle?"*

Participant, The Systems Sisterhood

Uncovering these skills was a revelation. The group found that they were tapping into parts of themselves that were just emerging or coming into being, parts that have been shadowed, devalued and forgotten. Some of these practices can be considered feminine and have a connection to the spiritual realms of practice. These practices move beyond rational and logical brain work and connect us to embodiment, intuition and wisdom.

The more our groups talked about these practices, the more collectively they became aware of their shared experiences together. In saying it out loud, we validated each other. We reflected on how these ways of working are a source of power.

We talked about what it might take to bring all of who we are to our work and not hide pieces of ourselves anymore, the power to be courageous and act in ways that honors these aspects of ourselves and different ways of knowing and leading. We reflected on the powerful culture that can emerge when a group of women all do that together. Our collective hope was that this conversation emboldens us to be more connected, authentic and more powerful leaders.
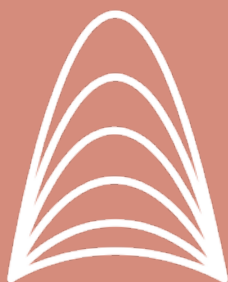
# 1. Seeing & doing things differently

We discussed the value of bringing a different perspective to our work. Often systems change requires holding diverse perspectives in spaces where we are facilitating conversation, systems processes or negotiating change. This creates a challenge for people who are trying to center marginalized perspectives and voices.

An ability to think and see differently is valuable and it takes courage to name these perspectives in dominant systems.

*What is feminine wisdom?*

*Reflecting on gender binaries and approaches. What came forward was that the masculine approach focused on tools and the feminine focused more on relationships and intuition.*

*Everyone talks about systems change, there has to be a willingness for people to see themselves in the system and be willing to listen and change.*

*Being outside is helpful, grounding decisions in lived experience, first voice and centering that.*

*How can we use some of the wisdom that's been blocked out by rational thinking?*

*Where on that dial do I have to be? When do I need to be fierce, and when do I have to be gentle?*

*Deeply personal experiences, they are critically relevant and important in our work. I think a lot about the link back from the personal to the systems.*

*I can see things before others can, sharing that truth, people think I'm crazy, in the end it turns out I was right.*

*We have incredible wisdom in our foundation and yet we hire big consultancies to do the work. It feels deeply patriarchal and doesn't recognize the wisdom internally.*

*Something about the air we're breathing, spaces and environment that are really masculine, the air is masculine. When that's at play, I cut myself off and I'm in my head. I'm conscious of the courage it takes to bring a different way of being there.*

*In my work I have had the ability to see what's coming and what has potential. I'm good at seeing what's going to happen.*

*When we create space for people to show up whole, it can unleash creativity.*

*I've been very intentional everything from the same source, not separating work, family etc. I don't have to switch roles, taken a lot of work and vulnerability. Before if one part was going badly I could run to another part. Now there's nowhere to hide.*

Participants' asked "how can we bring more of the heart into our work?"

*In personal development workshops I know I can be vulnerable, but I'm so much more scared to do it in work life.*

*I recited a poem, we used storytelling, dance, vocal work, silent walks, journalling. People are longing to connect and a deeply trans formative experience.*

*I'm trying to bring more of myself to work and there's something that's so resistant.*

*What permission are you bringing to the group by showing up vulnerable?*

*I'm struck by your confidence in that voice that is often in the shadows. We've been so busy translating it to be legitimate.*

*"I'm trying to bring more of myself to work and there's something that's so resistant."*

Participant,  The Systems Sisterhood

# 2. Holding space and intuition

The idea of slowing down and holding space was explored. We touched on ideas of sitting still in the unknown and just how uncomfortable that could feel. We talked about how it was an inevitable part of being in transition and the importance of letting go as it allows a new invitation. The group talked about the need to step outside their daily to-do list to tap into their own wisdom. To listen to themselves rather than listening to their surroundings.

Provocative thoughts on holding space and using intuition:

*Where I live the birds collect to migrate. 1000 birds, startle then sette. It's really interesting to think about the settle points. What's the energy of settle when what you work on is change? What's the value of thinking for a while. Like the negative space in a painting, that's the settle point.*

*I really feel like slowing down will actually open up space. It is a difficult thing to do. It feels like suffocation. Not having the air.*

*If we're being forged, we need to sit in the fire and let it forge us.*

*I want to do nothing.*

*There's been a lot I've been trying to let go of, there's no prescribed space for grieving and this is difficult and sad*

*Having come through so many transitions, I'm sitting happily in a lull and breathing and thinking of fiercely protecting that. Not asking the deep questions. Just kind of being..*

*How can we hold without carrying?*

*Nothing will happen in the constant generation of things. For me it's all in the pause. There has to be an unravelling first.*

*Being in the deepening of what is now, non-active, not seeding, not acting.*

*The idea of the beauty of the small things in the mundane, it's huge.*
*What if you stopped preparing things and trusted that you know? I had a great coach who challenged me about over-perfecting and performing, over-preparing.*

*I do a guided meditation to connect into the wisest part of myself. I consult with that person everyday. Ask her if she has any wisdom. Of course it's me, my wisest self. It helps to strengthen my intuition. To have a ritual is really helpful.*

*There's the contrast between the hamster wheel. Feeling like you have to do all of these things and knowing there's more cosmic or mythic work.*

# 3. Tuning in to our bodies

One thread that shows up in our exchanges is reflections on power. We're asking questions like "How does embodiment and reflective practice strengthen our efforts for systemic change?"

Tanya Birl Torres our guest speaker in the program explained:

> *Sheryl Sandberg talked famously about how women should 'lean in', but Michelle Obama in a brilliant interview recently with Oprah quipped 'it doesn't always work that way.' If you read her book Becoming, she clearly decided to allow her back body to lead and be the anchor for her family as they went through a huge transformation. To me leaning in is singular, leaning back is collective. It's about connecting to others' wisdom... It's worth acknowledging that it is really scary to be owning the presence we have ourselves. As women, we are trained not to do that. Women standing in their power can be seen as a national threat."*

Provocative quotes from our group on embodying change:

*The body can be a sense of grounding in difficult moments.*

*There's a particular way I stand when I can feel the shift happening, in that, I can hold the silence for longer.*

*In a tense moment having the audacity to keep the front soft and the back ensures the safety of the room. The front allows it to stay vulnerable.*

*When the women in my family are in their power, they're leaning back, not saying a word and everyone knows what's what.*

*I've never embodied myself into vulnerability. I've been missing all of this information about how I feel about the work I do.*

*Parenting, working in social and racial justice, where very difficult conversations come up. I'm interested in how we can use the body to stay in the moment and not flee.*

*Stand in our power, and all out, stand in our truth uncompromisingly.*

> *"I'm interested in how we can use the body to stay in the moment and not flee."*
>
> Participant, The Systems Sisterhood

# 4. Bridge innovation

One systems practice that kept coming up was the role of the bridger in systems change. Bridging is about connecting ideas, people, initiatives. The bridging role involves sensing something is possible, noticing the place that looks ripe and making a decision about where to focus energy next. It's about seeing that there is the potential for something magical to happen if we could just connect what's going on over here and what's going on over there. Sometimes it's about helping to translate an innovation that causes disruption.

Bridging is possible if there's a lot of trust in the bridger and this involves building authentic relationships. That takes time.

We also noticed the role of bridgers who are working in the margins and bridging to the 'centre', as opposed to bridgers who are embedded in dominant systems and structures bridging deeper into the system.

*What is the leadership role of a bridge innovator in transition?*

*I get frustrated. I know there's a possibility, I can sense there's something there, its finding a way of making it visible to others.*

*The bridge innovator often a gendered role, an invisible role, it's the backend person who's holding all these pieces to keep the front moving.*

*People who act in bridging roles for legitimate reasons do stay in the background, if you want to focus more on this role and support your own ability to do that it's time to make it more visible. Make it more explicit and transparent.*
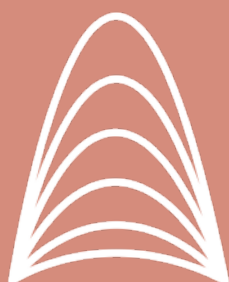
# INSIGHTS THROUGH TRANSITIONS

We invited women who were living through life transitions because we knew that this was a shared experience that offered deep insight and learning about leadership and systems change.

They said things like;

*How do I have the confidence to follow my gut and overcome the voices of doubt: Who do you think you are? What are you doing here?*

*I have been in a confusion around purpose and I'm tired of asking the question. How do you exit a transition you no longer want to participate in?*

*How do you move past surviving into thriving as a woman of color?  Move from the feeling of trudging through, overcoming, to twirling in the sun?*

We invited guest speaker Vanessa Reid to share her insights on transitions with the group. She said:

*A change is a fact. A new job. We broke up. A transition is a feeling. It's a process. There are all sorts of feelings connected to moving into the positional power of that new job. There is a process around "Who am I when I'm not in that life partnership anymore?" Suddenly a shift in identity begins to happen. Transitions are psychological and spiritual processes of becoming and unbecoming. They can be very difficult because they involve a loss of a known identity or a status.*

In our shared reflection about transitions we talked about holding the discomfort of the unknown, of going deeper into ourselves to gain strength through our vulnerabilities, of understanding that this is a state of incubating our potential.

We learned practices from Vanessa to help us navigate these moments in life including: listening for cues and clues in our everyday lives that can give us information about where we are going, how myths and archetypes are guides to understand the experience. Cultivating the ability to be comfortable in the mystery.

We explored how our personal transitions were connected to the larger world challenges and transitions we are in. We shared a sense that the learning we gathered from our transitions would serve us in our leadership roles.

We shared individual experiences and challenges we'd faced or were currently in. They were about family, relationships, careers and stages of life.

*I'm having a period in life of intense awakening, seeing things in a really different way.*

*I'm feeling isolated and alone. A feeling of being called to do something different in that environment. I need a group of peers.*

*The personal practice of listening to what the next opportunity is, is really important. To pay attention to that is a strategy.*

*I'm building a trust in that voice. It's becoming more undeniable. Also brings us a sense of vulnerability and caution.*

*Tell your story again. In the retelling, I realized I had to do that thing, that led me to another thing, which led to all of those things. I have to be ok with having no clue where this is going.*

*There's another voice. What is the energy I have in this phase of life? What does it contribute? What does it need?*

They were learning opportunities to honor health over toxic cultures. Sometimes they forced decisions to choose security over passions, they were about taking a leap to follow a deeper calling. There was a suggestion of a deep call for change, that is informed by our experiences as women:

*I have been working in a place with a toxic work environment and I'm about to transition out of my current role and into a new one. How to do that with integrity?*

*How can I feel ok to take up space and step into my full power? I feel frustrated with the way I limit myself in that.*

*How do I become the fullest expression of my womanhood, naming my needs, and dealing with the stuff I need to work through?*

*"I have to be okay with having no clue where this is going."*

*Should I get a full time job or stick with passion project?*

# 1.Being a daughter, mother, sister and grandmother

We brought in stories about what it means to be a woman in the context of our families. The strength and the challenge of the roles we were handed, we cherished and we set out to redefine.

Mothers represented the ultimate metaphor of embodied leadership: "I am pregnant, my front is literally soft, but my back has to be strong."  It was also the backdrop to many conversations about trying to be a good parent, caring for older relatives and other members of the family.

We explored lineages and reflected on the value of the intergenerational nature of lives and the Sisterhood community.

*To be qualified as a mother, I'm unacknowledged. But I'm going to risk my significance to be a mother.*

*My role as its been handed down to me is one of a giver.*

*When we talked to our mothers, about their lives and experiences as they grew older, all the lessons we had learned from their stories, we felt so grateful. Some have given us strength and others', challenge.*

*I play the role of the crisis holder. I always feel like I need to get into this, keep the family together.*

*There's turmoil in my family and people are always coming to me for advice.*

*I notice my own matriarchal lineage, my grandmother, mother, nieces, the lineage that I'm a part of comes up often in a positive and profound way. I feel for the men who don't have these circles and need them so desperately.*

*There is a connection between who we were in our family, how we convene others and our identity as we try and fit into an existing system*

## 2. Transitions into elderhood

It is very real that we live in a (dominant Western) culture that doesn't honor the transition into elderhood. In Western Anglo Saxon cultures, we often don't have the cultural role of elder.  The wise women group spoke about not being in the fray but also about the prevalent image of older people being disengaged. What does it mean to be older and engaged or not engaged in the work? What about elders who want to go on leading the work? We asked big questions like how can we thrive as we die?

One of the things that stood out to us as facilitators was just how much of an honor it felt to hear a group of elders speaking together. We noticed that we had probably never heard women of this age group, speaking about their work and lives in such intimate terms. This group were women who'd dedicated their careers and lives to bringing about positive change and had the 'long view', about what worked and didn't. The phases of life that felt so overwhelming to many of the women in the younger groups were seen in retrospect, with lessons learnt and with a sense of calm thoughtfulness. Some of the their pearls of wisdom:

*All our experiences have been immensely valuable. We as women are so undervalued in society generally. Old people in particular.*

*At a stage of maturing where I'm feeling that I care deeply and also don't give a sh\*t.*

*There's so much emerging at this point in my life, I do feel that I'm in a new stage, I want to fall in love with that.*

*So much of my work is aligned with who I am as a person. I have had a chance to work with amazing people. It's my world. Stepping out has been very lonely. The image I have is quite gray.*

*We are aging into isolation, into exhaustion, something that is less useful.*

*I'm letting go of all the ways I think I should be. I'm embracing the wild part.*

*The key action is to step back without stepping out.*

*What might be the conditions for older systems shift workers to contribute in a way that's valuable?*

## *"The key action is to step back without stepping out."*

Participant, The Systems Sisterhood

# THE VALUE OF PEER COMMUNITY

We started the Sisterhood because we knew all these amazing women doing systems change work and we were having side conversations with them about the transitions they were going through. The Sisterhood was an attempt to take these conversations seriously. To put them at the center for once and value the wisdom that could be emerged through collective inquiry.

We found wisdom in the many roles that women play from big hat leaders, to young women, mothers and elders.

The Sisterhood provided us a place to be open and honest about our lives, challenges and about the challenges we felt that are often unspoken. There was value in having peer mentorship within age groups and across all stages of life.

By shining light on the truths that emerged our hope is that women who work in systems change will be emboldened to act in new ways.

*The thing that leaped out at me the sense of loneliness in the work. The misfit between who they are inside and what they can materialize in the work.*

*What are the conditions we can create in our work that allow us to be more of ourselves?*

*Finding each other, leaving tracks for future generations, creating continuity of story, a whispered lineage of women.*

*It has been very powerful. There is a group of women doing all this crazy stuff, they show up, trust each other, they are a group of role models. These women are what I want to be when I grow up.*

*Everything that was said - I needed to hear that from someone outside of me. To stop being so hard on myself.*

*Knowing I'm not alone in feeling all the female things I feel. Women of all ages and knowing that those things, imposter syndrome, connection, relationships, reframing that way I think about systems change, it's affirmation.*

*"What are the conditions we can create in our work that allow us to be more of ourselves?"*

# THE TEAM

**Tatiana Fraser**

Tatiana has 20 years of experience leading and scaling systems innovations, creating strategic learning communities and movement building. Co-founder of Girls Action Foundation and co-author of Girl Positive (Random House 2016), she has worked to reframe the narrative around gender equality and to advance the empowerment of girls and women in Canada.  As co-founder of Metalab - a platform designed to support systems change strategy, collaboration and learning, she has collaborated with  Ashoka Global and Status of Women Canada to bridge resources and build ecosystem practice at the intersection of gender and innovation.

Tatiana is an Ashoka Fellow, recognized as one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women (Women's Executive Network), the recipient of the McGill Alumni James G Wright Award and the Champion of Lifelong Learning by the Quebec Association of Lifelong Learning. She has served on numerous boards and advisory committees including The UN Commission on the Status of Women, The Carold Institute, Community Knowledge Exchange, Food Secure Canada, Exeko, and Actua among others.

A mother of 2 kids and living in Montreal, she holds a Bachelor of Arts in Women Studies and MBA from McGill University.

**Rachel Sinha**

British award-winning social innovator, named by the Guardian newspaper one of 50 Radicals "changing the face of the UK". Rachel Sinha Co-founded The Finance Innovation Lab co-leading it for eight years.

Her work in The Lab, bringing together people post financial crisis to bring about positive change, involved launching a number of new organizations including The Natural Capital Coalition and AuditFutures. She was named Management Today/BskyB 'Future Leader of Sustainability' and sat on the European Commission Expert Panel on Social Business.

As a founder of The Systems Studio Rachel works on systemic change initiatives with everyone from WWF to the Young UN Agents for Change.

She has taught systems change at the US Federal Government, Yale and Harvard and she writes about it in HBR, Fast Company and in the book she co-authored (Labcraft: How Social Labs Cultivate Change Through Collaboration).

Rachel was a Scholar, at the Amsterdam School of Creative Leadership, has a MA in Marketing/CSR and a BA in Psychology. Rachel won a 'person of exceptional ability' Green Card to work in the US and now lives in San Francisco.

The Systems Sanctuary offers support for the growing community of pioneers experimenting with systemic solutions to systemic social and environmental problems. Our programs include:

In the Thick of It | for systems beginners and systems leaders

The Systems Sisterhood | for women of systems change

Embed It | for systems leaders trying to embed systems practice within their ecosystem

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