



Feminist Systems Change

by Tatiana Fraser Rachel Sinha (2021)

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1

Alignment

Why Gender and Systems Change?



In my twenties and during a difficult time in my life, I discovered feminism. You could say it kind of saved my life. So many things I had internalized about myself and so many of the experiences that I struggled with, that family and friends struggled with - finally made sense. What was personal now had a social, systemic and political frame. I discovered that I had agency for change. I wasn't messed up. The world was.

I began the journey of taking all that I had learned, to share this with other young women. I questioned, why wasn't critical thinking, empowerment, socio-political framing of our experience part of the normal education systems? I wanted to create a space and opportunity for young women to collectively reframe their experience too and do something with this new understanding of the world. The organization I co-founded in 1995, Girls Action Foundation, was born as a grassroots project supporting girls and young women's empowerment, leadership and social justice.

It was here that I cut my teeth on feminist activism. We were informed by Paulo Friere, *the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*. Anti-racism was feminist and intersectionality informed our world view. As third and fourth waves, the feminist movement was entrenched in identity politics, sorting out how to make sense of gender and multiple points of intersection including sexual identity, class, race, ability. In our work, we always knew that you couldn't slice gender in a binary

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way. We constantly asked ourselves in our work, ‘how can we transcend identity politics, how could we create a space to practice how to work and learn across difference?’

As we grew Girls Action Foundation, we were informed by complexity theory - this was my way into systems change. At the time, Brenda Zimmermann and Frances Westley were injecting complexity into the Canadian social change landscape through an innovative masters program at McGill University. I ate it up. This thinking validated my desire to do things differently. It offered a new ground from where to stand that redefined power from static to fluid, it introduced emergence as a strategy and it held the messiness of contradiction and paradox. It informed how we organized, how we incorporated learning into our work and how we approached change.

At the time, I knew we were working systemically but we lacked the tools and frames to articulate this. When I left Girls Action, I was preoccupied with systems change. I went on a journey with other senior leaders in Canada to explore the emerging systems change field of practice. We were seeking the edges and once again, were interested in how we might do things differently. We recognized the limits we were coming up against - including increased polarization and perpetuating climate crisis and inequities.

As I built my understanding of new systems frameworks, I re-affirmed that feminist practice aligned here. Feminism works to shift harmful dominant systems rooted in hierarchy and dominance. Systems change works at the structural, systemic and cultural level for change. Feminism is systemic; it is inherently anchored in a desire for systems change.



I saw how systems change practice could add to the feminist tool box, like it did for Girls Action, and vice versa. It could help us find new pathways for change. I also saw that there were resources being pumped into new systems change collaboratives, meanwhile, there was a huge lack of funding for grassroots women's movement work.

It also became clear to me that the systems change field lacked a power analysis. It was not fluent in social justice terms or an intersectional feminist lens. It was born and bred in the privilege of Western white academia, and it was male dominated. With a focus on relationships (importantly and usefully), it missed important questions like *'who is centered, valued and resourced here, and how is hidden and visible power playing out?'*

Many of the systems change experiments I observed, were being designed and orchestrated from and by funders. This was problematic because how could we truly hope to shift systems if we were starting from the center of that dominant system, or beginning within the paradigm of a flawed charity model? Feminist practice could strengthen systems change practice by bringing a power and justice lens.

The pandemic, along with racial reckoning have caused the tectonic plates to shift from under the feet of the systems change field over the last year. For many in the field, they are now more 'woke', but there are many who still struggle to genuinely work across difference and how to align justice in the systems change field. We are on a journey of alignments.

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– Tatiana Fraser, The Systems Sanctuary



We Are on a Journey of Alignments

There are many ways into systems change, many lineages and many practices. For example, we see that Indigenous knowledge systems originated this world view long before Western science found it. Many social change practices have embraced systemic approaches and ways of being far before systems change named this as the brand new solution to complex problems.

At the same time, systems change offers new tools and new thinking to support these efforts.

In a Western context, patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism are the meta systems that cut across all the systems we are working in. A gender and intersectional lens is a way to understand how inequity is a through line in any system. It helps to see and make sense of the interconnections and dynamics that are at work in unhealthy systems.

Furthermore, many systemic issues are gendered and these issues, like gender based violence, the feminization of poverty, are far too often minimized, erased and overlooked. We know women are often on the front lines of harmful systems and therefore, these women have solutions and visions for change.

Feminist practice strengthens systems change and vice versa.

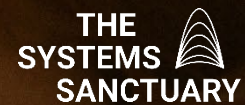
| FEMINIST PRACTICE | SYSTEMS CHANGE |
|---|--|
| Feminism brings the power analysis that is missing from systems change. | System thinking brings love by valuing relationships and the wondrous interconnectivity of our world of humans and non-humans. |
| Feminism politicizes the gendered and discriminatory nature of care. | Systems change invites us into caring and healing the self as a way to heal systems. |
| Feminism is at the cutting edge of binary breaking. | Systems change invites us to hold paradoxes. |
| Feminism sees intersectionality and recognizes that our multiple identities mean we experience systems differently. | A Systems lens invites the complexity and nuance in locating ourselves, and to the ways in which we are interconnected. |
| Feminists are closely connected to solutions but lack \$\$. | The systems change field increasingly have resources to support systemic solutions. |



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Case Studies

Our Work



We have brought a feminist lens into all of our work at The Systems Sanctuary; our platform formed four years ago to coach, train and support systems leaders internationally.

Through the Sanctuary, Rachel and I work to bridge the fields of feminist and systems practice on many fronts from supporting women identified systems leaders to supporting projects to build ecosystems and drive systems change addressing issues from climate, care, to gender based violence and human trafficking.

Specifically we launched The Systems Sisterhood as the Sanctuary began, as a peer mentoring group for women and gender diverse people leading systems change who were going through a life transition; from having babies, to ageing in the field of social innovation, to starting big new roles or stepping away from them.

We transcribed all our calls and tracked the challenges they faced, surfacing patterns and themes across our many cohorts, across years.

The Systems Sisterhood

A space for peer learning and inquiry into women's and gender diverse leadership.

Some of our questions:

- How are we located in the systems change work we do?
- How is my work connected to the broader system?
- What privileges and challenges give us motivation, power for this work?
- How does motherhood and care connect to systems change?
- How might we heal and strengthen our embodied and intuitive ways of knowing?
- How might we intend a culture that values deep relationality and is power aware?
- How are we interconnected in this work?
- What are the systems challenges and opportunities, the patterns and themes across issues?
- What can we learn from life transitions, how can this inform my systems work?
- How do I become more embodied?
- Where are we on the ecocycle? Personally, collectively?
- How is healing self connected to healing the system?

We have used this model of peer learning as the backbone of our work ever since, working with different groups from women leading on issues of climate and nature to those supporting survivors of gender based violence and human trafficking.

Through our work, we have emerged with a different quality of conversation. We are able to talk openly about everything from imposter syndrome, to internalized sexism and racism, to what it means to disrupt outdated cultures and systems as a woman.

We have witnessed the power of bringing women and gender diverse folks of different generations together. Allowing younger systems leaders to hear from those who have been through the life transitions they are grappling with. Seeing the career twists and turns that are possible. Hearing the ‘long view’ about how systems have shifted in a lifetime. It has been a deep joy to listen to the stories of these women over time.

In hosting conversations at this level of vulnerability we have moved from competition to camaraderie. Women truly caring about and supporting other women in the field, by lending their own experience and lessons learned to help others through a familiar transition.

We have seen the culture that emerges when we are able to have a conversation at this level of authenticity. It’s one that so many of the systems we are trying to shift would benefit from and it’s inspiring to imagine our many harmful systems thriving with this culture.

The Kitchen Cabinet

In collaboration with MakeWay, we are supporting women identified system leaders in the climate and nature space. Here we are uncovering how internalized patriarchy, colonization and white supremacy block our power and actions and how cultures of care can heal systems and inspire new pathways. Through collective sense making, systems mapping and peer learning, we are creating opportunities for systems change at personal, organizational and landscape levels. This is an ecosystem building initiative that will scale through new cohorts, funder collaboration and new funds to support front line change efforts.

The Gender Based Violence Learning Lab

An ecosystem initiative, in collaboration with Be the Peace Institute, that convenes a cohort of change agents across multiple systems in Nova Scotia. Here we are training system leadership and facilitating collective sensemaking to inform new collaborative actions. Our action planning includes decolonizing and shifting the funding system, challenging professionalization of the GBV field and diving into racism and how this marginalizes communities and work in the field. Most importantly we are building deep relationships across the ecosystem and a space to unpack the burn out and undervalue that is pervasive.

Challenges in Systems Change

Working in this way has given us a poignant insight into the challenges facing those who are trying to cultivate systemic change in different contexts.

What has become obvious is the many ways that women, whether they are leading systems change or on the front lines of social justice movements are burnt out, lack funding, and their perspectives, voices and visions are often overlooked or undervalued. **They often feel isolated and alone in these experiences; the intersection of racism and colonization exacerbate these challenges for BIPOC and gender diverse women.**

In our own experience as women systems leaders, we know many women in systems change are privileged to have access to levers and power to help move systemic approaches as well as to shift outdated mindsets. There is a need to unpack and challenge white dominance and norms in the systems change field and the role that women play here. At the same time, we see gendered and racialized barriers in systems change efforts. Cultures that perpetuate old power; competitive innovation environments dressed up as collaboration that value silver bullets, and slick solutions over the deep work required to do systems change. Initiatives that prop up the technocratic over the creative, and that value linear outcomes over emergence.

We see how senior male dominated leadership in the systems we seek to shift as well as in our own social change organisations and sectors, means that decision making power and control over how resources flow in ways that often don't support the ideas of women leaders. The trend in the systems change field for men to mansplain the importance of the feminine, makes it even more frustrating, when there is limited understanding of the language we speak or the ways in which we are working.

We believe that through supporting women identified leaders, recognizing and validating their experiences and supporting the emergence of collective and interconnected action, we can shift sexist and racist cultures and heal systems. We shift power when we 'scale deep' by valuing the deep work that happens in the root systems; personal transformation, movement and community building.

Using an intersectional lens and linking the personal, to the political, through to the systemic, we create the space to locate ourselves in our work, to include our role as mothers, daughters, caregivers and leaders and to pay attention to the social and political power dynamics at the same time. We hold the tension between the value of deep relationship building with the broader systemic analysis.



3

How do we do feminist systems change practice?



Leading from the heart and being vulnerable is hard in a world that values highly polished and professional presence. But we know silver bullets don't work and technical, individual entrepreneurial and policy solutions are not enough on their own.

Our methodology laid out below, highlights the ways in which we apply feminist systems change in practice:

Start with Lived Experience and Shift the Power

We center the conversation on lived experience first, theory second.

Feminist practice gives us a way to weave in power and intersectional analysis throughout in an authentic and real way. It offers us a guide to de-centre the dominant frameworks, expertise and narratives as a starting point and to re-centre and listen deeply to the experience of people.

Whether it's allocating resources, finding the leaders in a system or convening an ecosystem, our work begins with: *whose perspective is centred and whose is resourced?* These first steps are an important moment to ensure that the experiences and voices of the community, first voice, those living the harm of a system - will be leading the way. It also begins with a clear intention to shift resources and power from dominant systems to multiple and decentralized community leadership.

In our work with The Systems Sanctuary, we also focus on the messy, imperfect, everyday realities of the people leading systemic change. By doing this collectively, in small groups of up to 12 people, we are able to turn what feels like deeply personal challenges or failure, into a shared understanding that we are not alone in our experiences and that these are connected to systemic and deeply rooted cultural norms.

Bring In Systems Frames

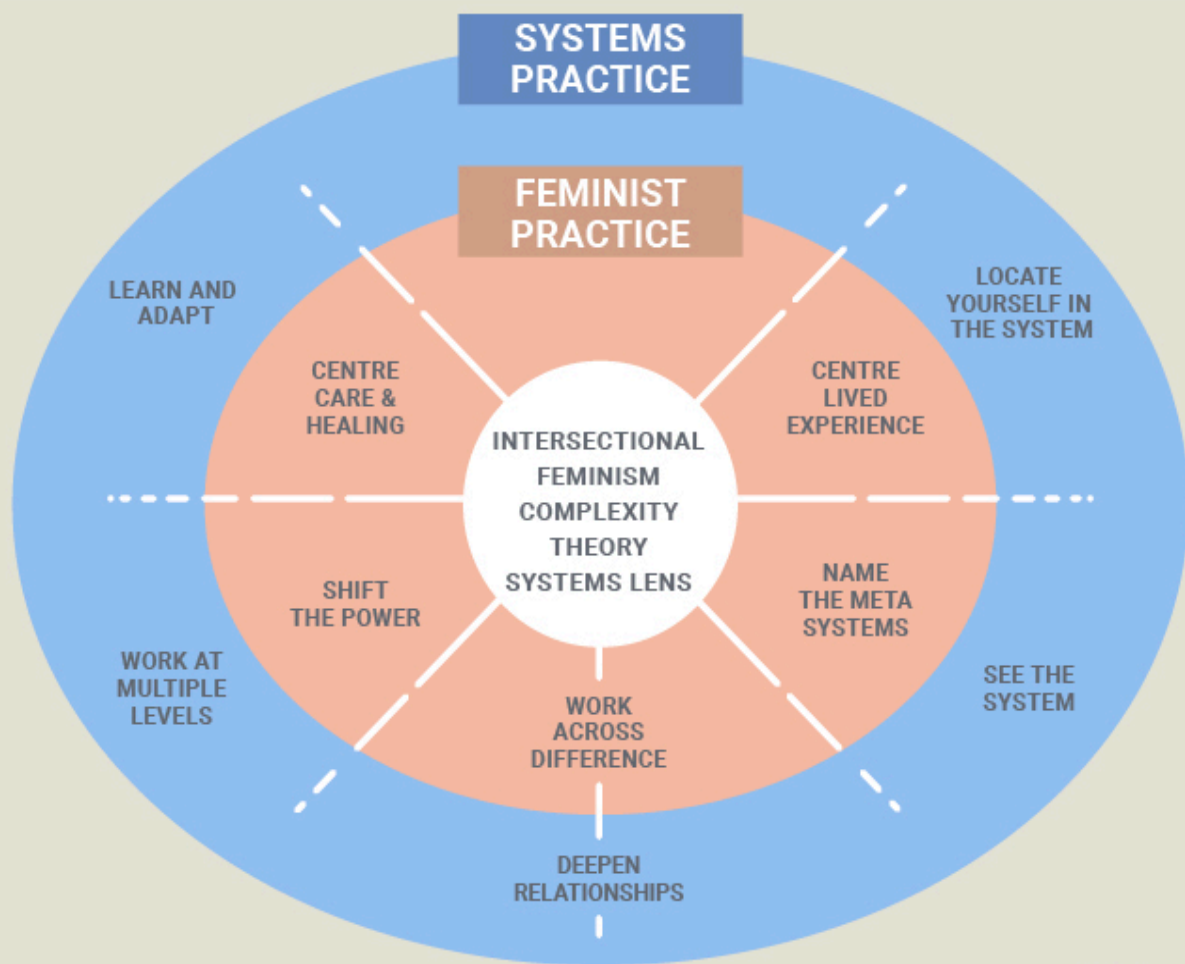
From here we bring in systems frameworks to reframe the challenges we see and develop strategies for change based on this new understanding and knowledge. We build community and connect ecosystems that are wiser in their collective actions.

Systems practice helps us to sense-make and move to action and strategy that could create the conditions to shift the system.

These strategies emerge through learning and from participants who are motivated and in the position to act on them.

Our methodology merges together feminist practice with systems change. We believe it is the combination of both together that helps to create interventions that are built on understanding, trust and deepened relationships across difference.

Feminist Systems Change Framework



THE FEMINIST SYSTEMS CHANGE FRAMEWORK
Fraser and Sinha (2021)

**THE
SYSTEMS
SANCTUARY**

Integrated feminist systems change in practice?

What does this all look like in practice when merged seamlessly together?

We support systems practitioners leading an initiative or cohort of leaders working collectively across an ecosystem. Specifically, we convene women identified and gender diverse folks leading systemic change in a particular sector over a minimum 7 month period. This is our integrated practice.

Name the Metasystems: Use an Intersectional Lens

- Intersectionality¹ means that we recognize how meta systemic issues like colonization, racism, sexism, homophobia, classism cut across all the systems that change work that we do. With this lens we acknowledge how these play on a personal and systemic level.
- Naming the metasystems means that we regardless of the system we are working in - i.e. health care, finance etc., we name the through line of these metasystems and hold this lens to bring equity and justice into each stage of the work.

Centre Lived Experience: Invite the Full Human

- Set out to create a culture that is flexible, invites the full human, and doesn't take itself too seriously.
- Invite everything that's going on in the background of our lives, as genuine context for the conversation.
- Ask everyone to state their needs and we acknowledge that we can never achieve a safe space, but a 'safer' one where we can be challenged, learn, deepen and grow.
- Honour that not everyone is an extrovert and loves public speaking. We create the conditions for one to one conversations, individual reflection, small group work and in creating small, trusted circles where people can be vulnerable.

1. Learn more about intersectionality here: Time Magazine. What's Intersectionality? Let These Scholars Explain the Theory and Its History. Arica L. Coleman. 2019

Centre Care and Healing:

- We work to connect to our bodies through embodiment, meditation, and other modalities.
- By creating connection and sharing our challenges, we break isolation and silos, reframe issues that illuminate pathways for transformation
- We recognize that people are on their own healing journeys; and by connecting the personal to the systemic, we invite deep dives and reflection into new spaces, shadows and contradictions.

Shift the Power: Weave Power Analysis Across Everything

- We integrate a power analysis in everything we do
- We locate our position and our own role in the systems we are trying to change
- We seek to understand more about our own power, challenges and privilege.
- We commit to finding out more about where that has come from in our lives.
- We seek to strategically redefine power and to shift power from dominant centres to the edges where the vision and innovation are alive

Deepen Relationships + Work Across Difference

- We create cohorts that engage different places in the system and that offer a multiplicity of perspectives, experiences and cultures across race, lived experience, sexual identity and age.
- Set firm conditions around showing up fully human, including an in-depth dive into equity and our identity, power and privileges in the circle.
- Centering conversations on the challenges that leaders are facing at work, allowing a lot of room to weave in the personal challenges that intersect and exacerbate these issues.
- We listen and speak at depth and notice/weave interconnections
- We show up as authentic as feels ok and possible on the day

See the System: Facilitate Collective Seeing and Sensemaking

- We host conversations about what participants are noticing in the system, how they practice care for themselves, what ideas are growing, stagnating or need to be let go of in their field

- We transcribe everything so we have a record of what is said verbatim. We re-read, highlight, cluster and track emerging themes from the conversations.
- We bring in systems frames as a way to see the systems that surround our experience and to strategize about how we might cultivate the conditions to create change
- We also map different roles participants are playing in the ecosystem they exist in- what is missing and what could be focused on.

Work at Multiple Levels: Move to Strategy

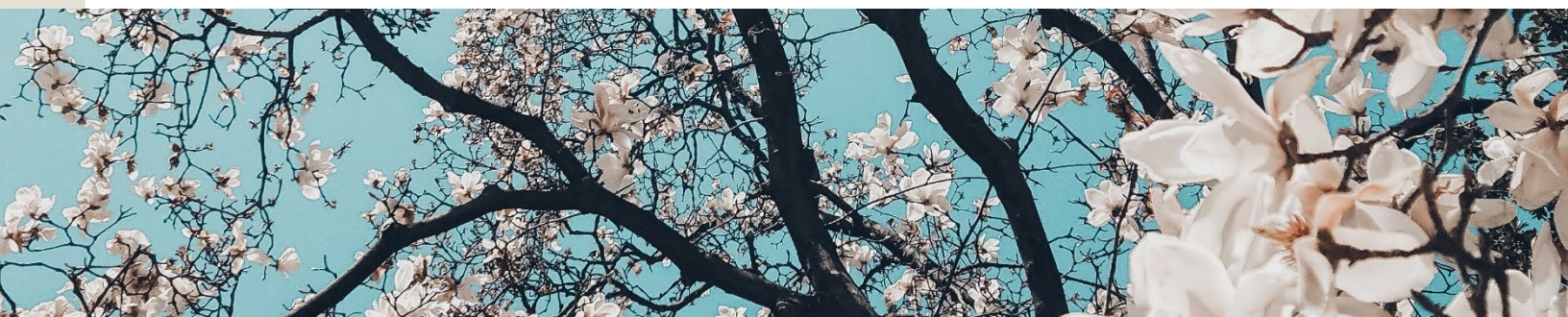
- We plot challenges at different levels in the system and opportunities in the system that could be actioned on.
- Our frameworks offer powerful ways to move to action and see new pathways that might not have been obvious before.
- Systems practice helps us to turn this experience into a strategy that could create the conditions to shift the system.

Learn and Adapt: Working with Emergence

- We adapt as we go, shifting as needed to meet the needs of who shows up, rather than what we planned to do when we began
- We emerge collective intelligence, sharing it back and building on it as the program progresses
- These strategies emerge from women who are motivated and in the position to act on them.

Importantly, we shift the system by demonstrating a culture that honours our full, messy experience at home and at work as part of the change work we are trying to do. And we take time to build out a collective strategy for systems change over a significant period of time.

When an ecosystem does emerge from this process, with new innovation groups, or potential collaborations, we have built the foundation of new professional relationships that run deeper and are more authentic on which it has a chance to flourish.



Feminist Systems Change in Action

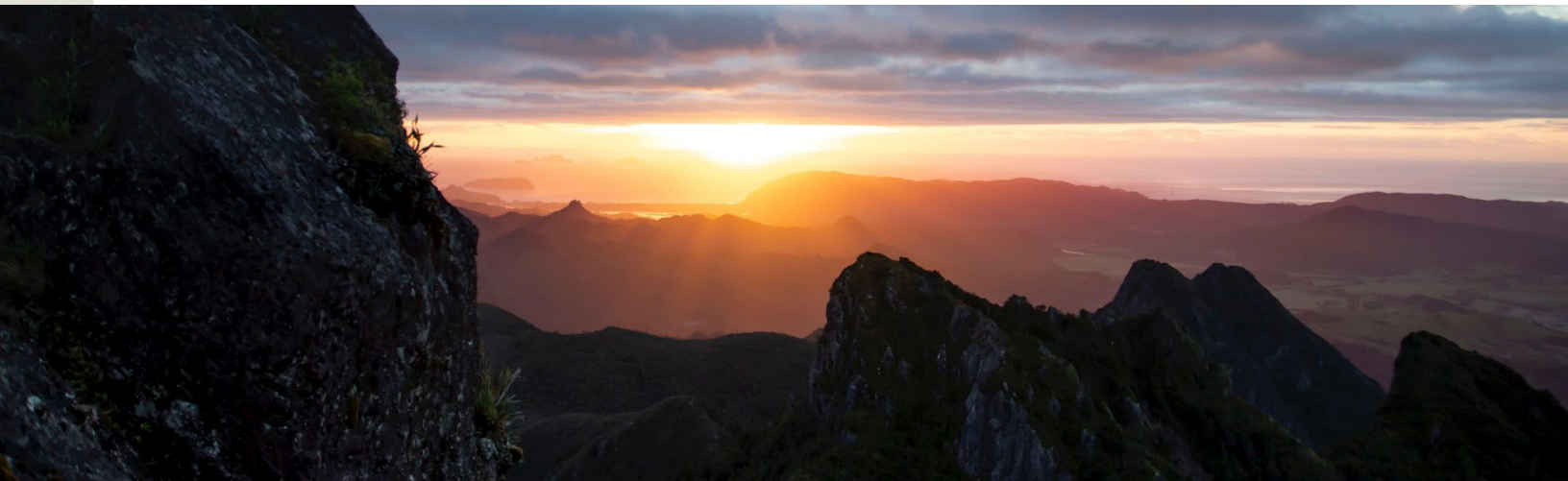
This space has been an important touchstone for everyone involved, especially during COVID. Participants tell us how the process has impacted them personally and professionally. It has supported leaders to have the courage to leave toxic work spaces, or to stand up to bully colleagues so their ideas get some light. It has validated experiences that felt like personal failure and reframed them in a way that creates movement for change, its allowed for critical reflection on how white supremacy culture has operated and stifled cultures and made people sick, it has deepened understanding for the human challenges when we are working across difference and it has sparked new projects and collaborations that would not have happened otherwise.

It's building an interconnected web of fierce and powerful women leaders who are connecting an ecosystem to act on the climate emergency and other social and environmental issues.

At the heart of this work is a belief that silver bullets and technocratic solutions that dominate the halls of power - aren't working, that there are many brilliant efforts alive in communities that are overlooked and under-resourced and that care and healing can transform systems when they are centred.

This has been a space where we can name the shit that doesn't get talked about and that gets invisibilized, internalized and treated as an individual problem. We make the connections and start to see how these patterns are connected to the systems we are working to shift. These interconnectivities are like a healing salve that strengthens a collective vision for change.

We create this culture by aligning a feminist lens with systems practices. We balance critical and power analysis, with the relational; we prioritize the human experience and then theory second, we value emergence over linear strategy and outcomes and we try not to take ourselves too seriously.



How feminist practice strengthens systems change practice.

Integrating feminist practice into systems change strengthens our capacity on many levels.

| Feminist practice: intersectional feminist lens | Systems capacities: working with complexity | How feminist practice strengthens systems change |
|---|---|---|
| Center lived experience: challenge notions of expertise | Locate yourself | Shifts power from expert to lived experience; from centers to the margins, from fragment to whole human. |
| Name the metasystems; patriarchy, white supremacy, colonization | See the systems - collective sense making | Brings a power analysis to systems analysis that sees the systems level through line of justice and equity |
| Create conditions to work across difference | Build relational depth | Builds capacity to name power and access in the relational and in the room |
| Shift power and resources - into the hands of the people on the front line of the problem | Create a strategy for systems change - at multiple levels | Values the important work of scaling deep, working at the root systems to inform multi level strategies for change. |
| Centre care and healing | Learn as you go - emergence, reflection and action | Informs and shifts the focus from technical/policy focus to centering the full human with dignity and liberation. |

4

Our Next Steps: Systems Change @ Intersections



An inquiry

We've been immersed in the stories internationally for four years, and we have worked with incredible women who are leading deep systemic change. We know it's time for some of these conversations to be amplified loud and proud. They are inspiring and validating, frustrating and clarifying and we know that they leave women and gender diverse folks feeling like they are part of something much bigger than themselves.

Moving forward, we want to pay attention to the energy and potential of interconnections of issues. To help see from new perspectives and think about where this might guide us.

Through this work, we hope to expand and amplify this conversation and provoke a movement that supports women-identified systems leaders to lead as themselves in all their complexity, in a culture we know the world needs more of.

Fieldbuilding

We are committed to connecting and supporting the field of feminist systems change practice and we do this by bridging the fields of systems change and gender equity.

Specifically we:

- Support women system leaders to create and lead change
- Support feminist systems change projects, to become thriving ecosystems for positive change
- Set up structures to support front-line change leaders

We believe in working at the many intersections of gender and systems change to catalyze new visions for transformational ways forward into the future.

To join us, get in touch!

Acknowledgments

We are so grateful to everyone who has contributed to this work and learning. Thank you to our many partners, collaborators, participants and to those who thoughtfully provided feedback and suggestions as we developed this publication.

Learn more about The Systems Sanctuary

We are a support system for leaders trying to shift unhealthy systems.

We work with leaders who already have a Network, Cohort, Team or Ecosystem and are trying to create the conditions for it to have a deeper systemic impact.

If you find yourself saying ‘we need to change the system’ but are overwhelmed with what to do next, we can support you to help you think strategically about ‘how to’.

We ‘coach, don’t play’. We have your back as the leader of your initiative and support you to do your work with more clarity, confidence and less stress.

We help you work strategically through the unique challenges that face systems leaders; from managing stakeholder relationships, to how to communicate your work and we can help you build learning into your work.

We work individually and with cohorts across an ecosystem.

Specifically we offer coaching, strategy support, and we host regular peer-mentoring courses. We also train leaders internationally on systems change practice.

Working with us feels connected, compassionate and strategic. We embed a power and justice analysis in all the work we do and we listen, champion and care deeply about the people we work with.

With ties to the UK, US and Canada, we work internationally.

www.systemsanctuary.com



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