

Partnership Projects for Systems Change on Gender Equity

A Snapshot of Key Learnings

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Women and Gender
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Canada



Contents

Introduction.....4

Health Nexus’ Approach to Evaluation5

Partnership Project Achievements7

Understanding the Work of Partnerships8

 Early partnership dynamics reflect a ‘partnership puzzle’ 9

 Midpoint partnership dynamics assessed and explored..... 10

Addressing Barriers and Enacting Change within Systems.....12

 1. Institutional and political context..... 13

 2. Organizational context..... 14

 3. Funding model context..... 16

Key Learnings from the Partnership Projects.....17

 1. Partnerships benefit from using an intersectional feminist framework..... 18

 2. Partnerships need to pay attention to their internal power dynamics 18

 3. Funders are key partners and can participate in equalizing power..... 19

 4. More resources are needed for greater project impact 19

Moving Key Learnings into Action: Recommendations and a Toolkit20

Final Reflections.....20

Excerpt from Poem: Women in Political Action21

References22

Introduction

This report is a summary of a three-year evaluation (2016-19) by Health Nexus. The evaluation examined five partnership projects on Empowering Women for Political Action. The projects and this evaluation were funded by Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada, formerly Status of Women Canada.

In 2016, WAGE introduced a new funding model through a call for proposals to enhance women's participation in democratic and public life. The new model encouraged organizations to partner with non-conventional partners, including media and private sectors.

The new funding model acknowledged that systemic change requires work and action at multiple levels. The model introduced the element of a co-applicant approach, where organizations with diverse mandates and structures are required to work in partnership on one specific initiative. Each co-applicant organization received a portion of funds (independent grant money) to work on the common partnership project.

Parallel funding for partnership support and evaluation was another innovation of WAGE's new funding model. The model aimed to enhance collaborations and to better understand partnerships' needs and priorities for support (SWC, 2016). Health Nexus was selected to provide ongoing assessment and evaluation of the new funding model, to deliver partnership support services and tools to the funded projects, and to develop a toolkit to guide future partnership project initiatives.

This summative report evaluates how the WAGE funding model, combined with Health Nexus' partnership support activities, increased opportunities for collaboration among partners and furthered their efforts to achieve project

Key terms

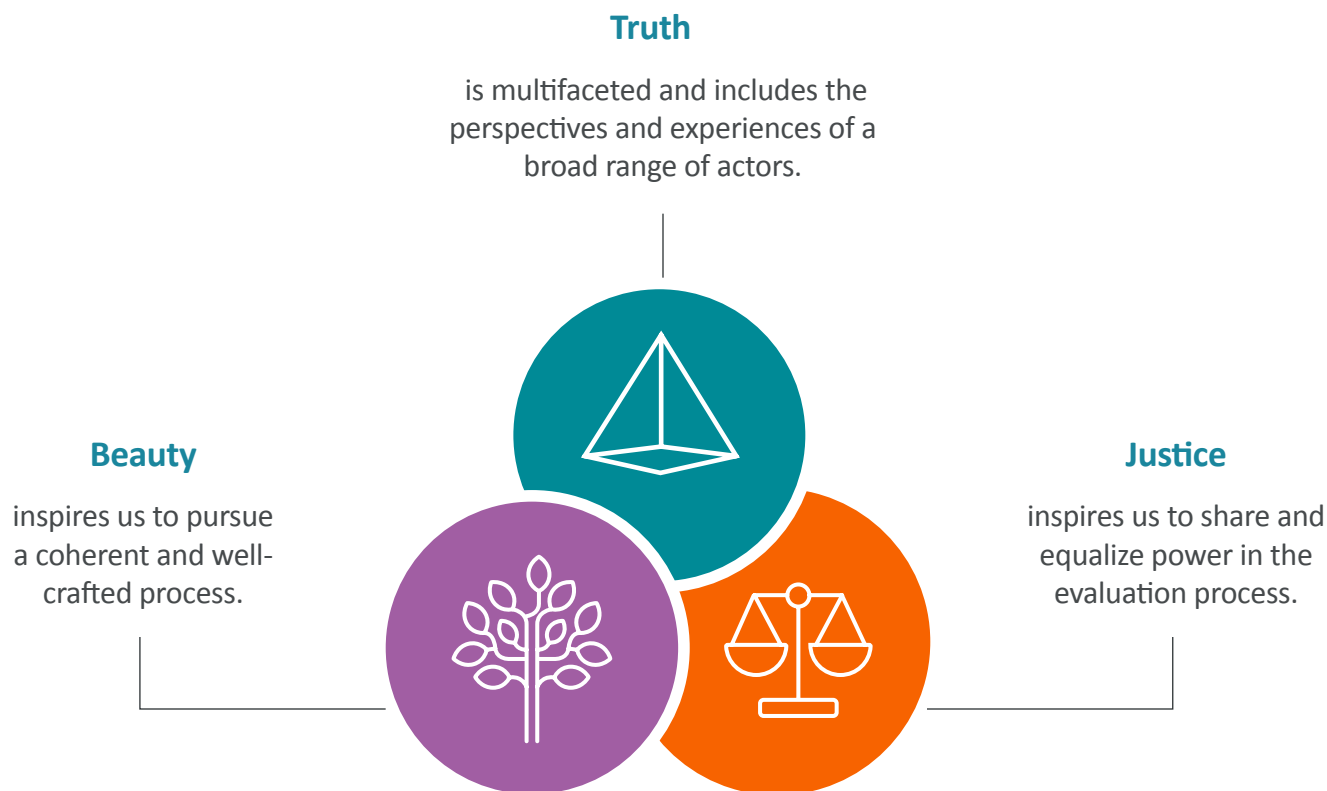
- **Partnerships** refer to the five partnership projects funded by WAGE.
- **Core partners** refer to the funded organizations (aka co-applicants) within each partnership project.
- **Partners** refer to all engaged stakeholders including core partners and their other engaged partners.

goals. In addition to achievements, the report also describes a number of challenges faced by the projects and how the partnerships addressed them.

To inform future projects, the report identifies four key learnings: partnerships benefit from using an intersectional feminist framework; partnerships need to pay attention to their internal power dynamics; funders are key partners and can participate in equalizing power; and more resources are needed for greater project impact.

Recommendations from the evaluation are fleshed out in an accompanying toolkit, *Optimizing Partnership Projects for Systems Change: A Toolkit for Funders and Partners*. (Health Nexus, 2020).

Health Nexus' Approach to Evaluation



Health Nexus took a developmental and participatory approach to evaluate the new funding model, including partnership support. The approach reflected the 'truth, beauty and justice' inspirational framework proposed by Ernest R. House (2014) and combined this framework with an intersectional feminist framework (IFF).

This integrated approach recognized differences in power between participants, while capturing partnership-specific histories, local politics, partners' and stakeholders' lived experiences, diverse knowledge, and social locations (Hankivsky et al., 2014). The approach also provided rapid feedback to inform Health Nexus' partnership support services, and supported core partners' own learning to strengthen their partnership performance.

Primary voices that informed the snapshot and toolkit



During the evaluation, Health Nexus' partnership support and evaluation team facilitated annual partnership reflection meetings, held check-in phone calls with the funded partner organizations, performed key informant interviews and conducted an end-of project survey.

Partnership Project Achievements

Stronger collaboration with a broader range of stakeholders, with new partners engaged in gender equity work. For example, three partnerships established steering or advisory committees on gender equity or participated on existing women's committees in their region.

Increased capacity to navigate political environments by core partners and other engaged stakeholders.

Enhanced capacity to bridge differences among the core partners. Four partnerships noted that they had improved ways of working together, despite their differences.

Influencing and informing policy development related to gender equity issues in the project regions.



Engagement of stakeholders in activities on gender equity, Intersectional feminist framework (IFF) and Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) to build awareness and capacity. For example, four partnerships held educational events and developed toolkits for stakeholders and the public; two produced communication materials to share knowledge; three delivered training sessions on gender equity, GBA+ or IFF.



The number of elected officials who run lone-parent households has grown. Some of the conversations I am having are surprisingly optimistic...

Understanding the Work of Partnerships

Working in partnership is a complex undertaking with both strengths and challenges. WAGE's funding of partnership support services to the projects meant core partners could benefit from Health Nexus resource materials, webinars and coaching to gain a deeper understanding of normal partnership dynamics as well as helpful strategies and tools for their collaborative work. In turn, through their participation in the funding model evaluation activities,

core partners helped Health Nexus generate new insights into the work of partnerships. Some learnings were more global, and others were more specific to WAGE's funding model context and goals.

Over three years, core partners identified what made their partnerships stronger:

- Diversity of expertise and experience.
- An appropriate governance structure.
- Greater attention to power dynamics among core partners and other engaged stakeholders.
- Clear decision-making processes, and clarity about roles and responsibilities.
- An intersectional feminist framework (IFF) to include women who are more likely to be excluded from political participation (see further discussion on page 18).



[The] steering committee and staff... have diverse, plus robust, experience working on women's political issues. Valuable wisdom at the table.

Partners also described challenges related to their partnership work including:

- Differences in governance structures, including decision-making processes.
- Uneven capacity between nonprofit and for-profit directors, and different incentives for their participation.

- Geographical distance between partner organizations.

Overall, as projects progressed and levels of trust increased, all partners were able to see the benefits of working together collectively on a common project. In the end, those partnerships with both nonprofit and for-profit partners found that benefits exceeded challenges because of the

flexibility, the consistency, and the feminist commitment of their for-profit partners.

Bringing together diverse partners to address gender equity undoubtedly presents fertile ground for a cross-pollination of ideas and broader mobilization.



The partnership has done some serious intentional work on working together more effectively and collaboratively.

Early partnership dynamics reflect a 'partnership puzzle'



In the first project year, core partners' experiences revealed how the same differences that contribute strength to a multisectoral partnership, such as a diversity of knowledge and skills, can also pose challenges. These differences were identified as dynamics of the 'partnership puzzle'.

Although challenging, effective partnerships for systems change intentionally seek out differences, navigate them and learn from them. All project partnerships exemplified this. To varying degrees, challenges posed by these differences lessened over time.

Midpoint partnership dynamics assessed and explored

Centre circle

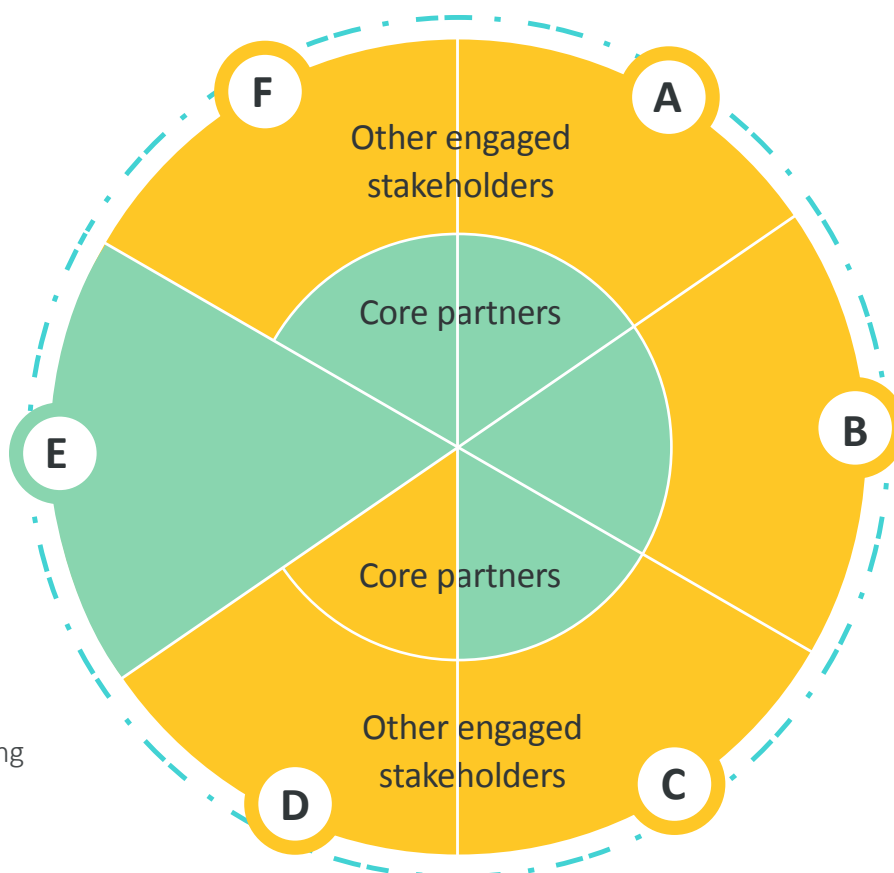
How core partners assessed their work together

Larger circle

How core partners assessed their work with other engaged stakeholders.

Overall, core partners gave their partnerships a 'high' or 'medium' rating in each of the six requirement areas.

■ High rating ■ Medium rating



At midpoint in their three-year projects, to support each partnership's collective reflection and planning and to bring forth new insights about their experiences with the funding model, Health Nexus adapted the evidence-based Self-Evaluation Tool for Action in Partnership (Bilodeau et al., 2017) into a 'wheel' mapping activity for participatory reflection.

With the wheel, core partners in each partnership assessed their collective work, as well as their work with other engaged stakeholders.

The wheel figure above shows, on average, how the five projects assessed their partnerships at the midpoint (1.5 years) of their 3-year project funding. Each segment of the wheel corresponds with a requirement for effective action in partnership, as described by Bilodeau and co-authors (2017).

- A Who participates?** What is the range of perspectives relevant to the issue?
- B What are the options for participation?** Is there early stakeholder involvement in strategic decisions?
- C What is the extent of participation [for those with the least power]?** How engaged are stakeholders in negotiating and influencing decisions?
- D How is participation sustained?** What is the commitment of strategic and pivotal stakeholders to the project?
- E Is participation empowering?** Do the partnership arrangements favour equalization of power among the stakeholders?
- F Does participation result in collective action [rather than individual]?** Do partnership arrangements help build collective action?

Health Nexus' Partnership Assessment Wheel activity facilitated a holistic approach to partnership reflections and analysis. Through this activity, core partners shared deeper stories about the complex dynamics of their collective work.

Reflecting on the range of stakeholders involved (requirement A), core partners shared that groups representing equity-seeking communities and those who bring diverse lived experiences to the table need more resources for participation.



[There is a]... lack of Indigenous women's organizations participating in the project.

Providing different options for people to participate in the project (requirement B) received a high rating by core partners despite existing barriers to participation, such as lack of resources. One project took a strategic approach to deepen participation by asking stakeholders to share their own ideas on priority actions for gender-equity, based on their own context.

Core partners also shared that having groups with different levels of power in the project meant some stakeholders with influence and support, including financial, could suppress the voices of those with less power (requirement C).

The lowest rating on the wheel highlighted core partners' biggest 'midpoint' challenge as sustaining the participation of strategic and pivotal stakeholders through the project (requirement D). All partnerships noted shortage of funding as a barrier to ensuring the ongoing involvement of women with lived experience, including those who represent traditionally marginalized groups. Also, projects operating in bilingual jurisdictions found their proposed translation budgets to be insufficient, which limited bilingual stakeholder engagement.

Although the core partners assigned their highest rating, on average, to how well partnerships equalize power among stakeholders (requirement E), they explained that some groups had more power than others.



[Elected officials] have their way of seeing things ... we want them to remain our friends... [While] we want actions regarding sexist statements, we cannot go straight to that...

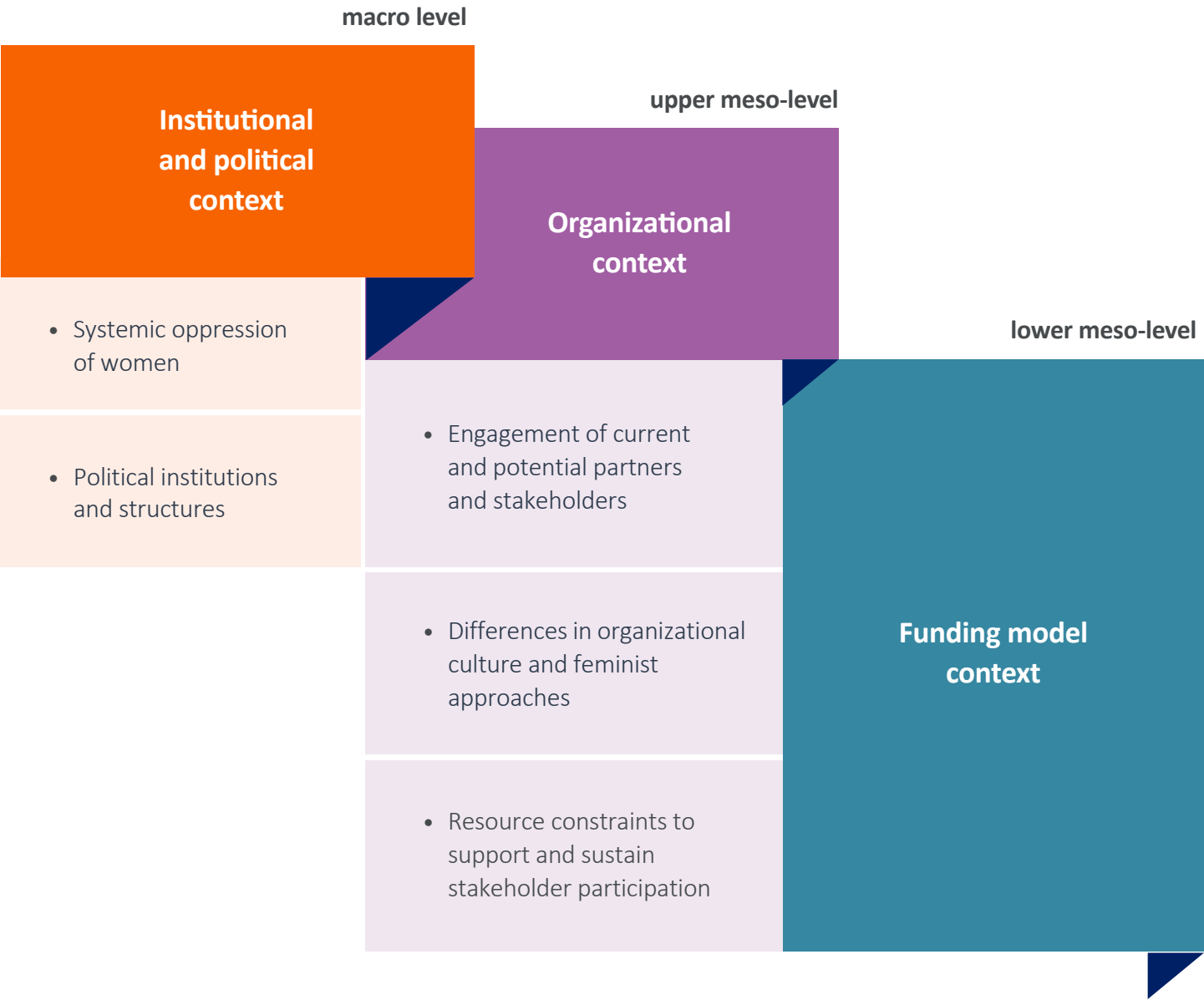
Core partners described their challenges related to taking collective action (requirement F). Differences in the feminist cultures of core and other engaged organizations made it difficult for some to work collectively. Delays in the funding roll-out made it harder to establish relationships early in the project. In some instances, specific deliverables in the unique funding agreements of each core partner took precedence over collective partnership action.

Addressing Barriers and Enacting Change within Systems

Over three years, core partners increased their understanding of the structures in society that prevent women from participating in political action, and how to move forward their project goals within these structures.

Barriers identified by the project core partners fall under three interconnected categories: institutional and political context (macro-level); organizational context (upper meso-level); and funding model context (lower meso-level).

Barriers at multiple levels



1. Institutional and political context

Systemic oppression of women

Institutional barriers include the lack of formal and transparent channels for women to enter political life, and the fact that much political work happens through informal networks and old boys' club connections. Partnerships described a 'myth of equality' about women's participation in political life. They noted continued resistance to gender equity efforts among some political parties.



We continue to fight a lot against the myth of equality. We underestimated the challenge!

The men think gender equality is being nice to the one woman at the table.

Even when women's individual efforts are successful, and they are able to stand for election, many partners realize that political parties often position female candidates in so-called 'unwinnable' ridings. Further, women who are elected to public office are most often white, cis-gendered, middle-class and not differently-able. They do not reflect the diversity of women in Canada.

Core partners agreed that moving from the individual to the structural level to address systemic oppression is a long process that requires long-term funding. Sporadic, short-term, project-based funding prevents partnerships from achieving a long-term impact and undermines systemic change. Although the partnerships made small 'dents' in systemic barriers, more time is needed for continuous and strategic action to secure advancements.



Diverse women are not getting elected...this gets us thinking about the bigger issues – the electoral system, and voter turnout. We get women elected, but they are not very diverse.

Political institutions and structures

Partnerships described the uncertainty caused by electoral cycles and the absence of fixed election dates. Unpredictable election dates and timing impeded women's participation. At the project level, elections caused delays in mobilization and disrupted proposed activity timelines.

Although political institutions and structures posed many barriers, some partnerships made progress at a regional level when new and emerging regional structures created opportunities to influence the stakeholders involved, to integrate GBA+ consultations at the municipal level, and to raise public awareness.



We have increased public awareness about the relationship between equity and fixed election dates.

So many people still ask why we call for more women in politics. We had to create a one-pager on this.

2. Organizational context

Engagement of current and potential partners and stakeholders

Progress was made on the involvement of media, political parties, municipalities and marginalized groups in some projects. For example, one partnership achieved signed agreements with three political parties to collaborate on the development of action plans for equity.



As part of [the city's] gender equity strategy implementation, ...they gave us responsibility for doing the survey. It was a value added for them.

Overall, however, the partnerships noted mixed results. Several found it difficult to engage elected officials after elections and during the summer break. The lack of long-term funding prevented partnerships from developing more sustained stakeholder relationships, including those with Indigenous groups.

More concerted and prolonged action is needed to allow intersectional engagement, a deeper mobilization of stakeholders, and the securing of connections made.



We have to build [engaging additional groups] into the projects' planning, structure and staffing.

Differences in organizational culture and feminist approaches

Several partnerships said that differences in organizational culture and feminist approaches among core partners created initial barriers to effective communication. Through collaboration over time, and in some instances with partnership support services provided by Health Nexus, partners were able to bridge their differences and work together to achieve common goals.

Resource constraints to support and sustain stakeholder participation

Partnerships noted that nonprofit organizations face inherent barriers from chronic under-funding over many years. Researchers have also documented how the sector has been under pressure to cut overhead costs, resulting in deep cuts to administrative expenses, front-line staff wages and professional fees, and an undermining of sector capacity (Lecy and Searing, 2015). Overall, partners provided each other with peer support, and in some cases Health Nexus facilitation supported partners to better coordinate their responsibilities and deliverables.

3. Funding model context

All of the projects concluded that their three-year funding cycle was too short to achieve effective partnership development, to solidify related achievements, and to sustain impacts. A number of partners said five years would be needed.

Another funding model barrier related to delays during the project roll-out stage, which upset project timelines and, for some projects, compromised the alignment of planned activities in relation to scheduled elections.

Communication channels with the funder emerged as a significant element of the funding model context. In some regions, some core partners noted a lack of feedback on reports, which they found demoralizing. In cases where WAGE program officers were more involved, and participated in meetings and check-ins with partners, these communications positively impacted the project by reducing uncertainty among grantees and allowing for helpful interventions.



It is only now, after two years, that the partnership is coming to fruition. This reinforces that we need more than three years of funding.

We just had to deal with limitations of [the funding] and keep doing what we have been doing within the confines of the project.

Key Learnings from the Partnership Projects

Partnerships benefit from using **an intersectional feminist framework**.



Partnerships need to **pay attention** to their **internal power dynamics**.



Funders are key partners and can participate in equalizing power.



More resources are needed for greater project impact.

The reflections by core partners on systemic barriers to gender equity illustrate how tackling barriers to women's participation in politics can seem an impossible task. Over three years, project partnerships identified where they were able to make a difference and shared useful lessons.

1. Partnerships benefit from using an intersectional feminist framework

A key learning was that partnerships working in gender equity need to pay attention to how gender connects and interacts with other factors that cause discrimination against women, such as race, income and sexual orientation. An intersectional feminist framework strengthens partners' understandings of and collaborative work on gender equity within complex systems.

Core partners highlighted how a persistent 'myth of equality' diminished elected officials' and political parties' grasp of the relevance and complexity of gender equity. If partnerships do not use an intersectional feminist framework in the context of political empowerment, they may perpetuate beliefs that women have already achieved equality simply because some women were granted access to structures previously reserved for men. Also, lack of an intersectional feminist focus in work that aims to empower women for political action may result in the political advancement of women who do not share inclusive feminist goals, at the expense of women from marginalized communities.

Core partners also found an intersectional feminist framework helpful when:

- Engaging and keeping involved a broader range of stakeholders.
- Bridging differences between organizations.
- Taking action collectively as a partnership, rather than as a set of individual organizations.
- Equalizing power among all project partners.

Integrating an intersectional feminist framework early in partnership work can help partners to de-centre power and achieve greater participation of women who are more likely to be excluded from political participation, such as immigrant, Indigenous, racialized, trans and differently-able women.

Taking an intersectional approach to gender equity is more important than ever in today's political climate. An intersectional approach can help to counteract populist politics of 'intersectional hate' and to reinforce the relationship between women's equality and human rights.

2. Partnerships need to pay attention to their internal power dynamics

When project partnerships included powerful and influential stakeholders, such as members of established political parties, partners expressed some concern that strong gender equity messages could be 'watered down' to become more acceptable to these members. Such dynamics posed a threat to the partnership's ability to reach its goals.

At the other end of the power spectrum, core partners' engagement of less powerful equity-seeking groups was often limited, and did not include enough representation of Indigenous, immigrant and racialized women and the groups that represent them. Partnerships need to spend more time and money to better engage marginalized stakeholders. When projects have early funding to compensate marginalized groups, these stakeholders can be engaged in decisions about which actions to take and not just in implementing actions plans developed by others.

3. Funders are key partners and can participate in equalizing power

The new WAGE partnership funding model, and the partnership support services it provided, helped project partners bridge their differences and share their diverse strengths to leverage change. Evaluation of this model demonstrated that funders can indeed play a more pivotal role supporting multi-sectoral partnerships for systems change.

Funder innovations in reporting and evaluation can further support collaborative action, reflection and learning. Two suggestions that emerged from the evaluation were:

- Move beyond traditional vertical accountability (from the grantees to the funder) to include horizontal accountability (among core and other engaged stakeholders). Such '360-accountability' helps ensure the project is guided by shared values and engagement among partners and intended project beneficiaries.
- Include deliverables related to the processes of building and maintaining partnerships. While requested by funders in general, specific deliverables should be identified by the partners themselves.

4. More resources are needed for greater project impact

Unstable and insufficient funding affects core partners' ability to create long-term systemic change. Evaluation findings are consistent with recent research documenting how uncertain and inadequate funding seriously reduces the ability of women's organizations to connect and work together to improve conditions for women. (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2019).

Core partners and researchers agreed that having a broad range of stakeholders in partnerships is critical to success but keeping them involved over the long term is a challenge. Lack of funding was the biggest barrier to sustained involvement, because it limited budgets for participation, transportation, and child care. These constraints are especially challenging for small non-profit organizations.

Lack of resources also reduces the ability of projects to address different levels of power among partnership stakeholders and to keep all members equally engaged. Increased and stable funding over the long term, combined with flexibility in budget lines, will help women's organizations work together and with others to include more stakeholders who bring a broader range of intersectional perspectives to the table. Positive outcomes may also include a shift from gender equity as exclusively 'women's work' to work involving more men as allies.

Moving Key Learnings into Action: Recommendations and a Toolkit

The three-year evaluation of WAGE's innovative funding model identified the following high-level recommendations for funders of partnerships, to optimize future investments towards effective and equitable systems change:

- Fund systems change projects for five or more years.
- Apply a participatory and developmental approach to project evaluation.
- Fund and support equitable partnership and participation.
- Foster environments for meaningful collaboration.
- Fund third-party support services that nurture meaningful collaboration.

For core partners, high-level recommendations include:

- Budget more resources for collaboration.
- Work together from an equity lens.
- Design the project plan, and evaluation plan, together.
- Acknowledge and address differences among partners.

Health Nexus developed a complementary toolkit which discusses and details the above recommendations, provides further guidance based on the evaluation results, and shares links to other helpful resources.

Optimizing Partnership Projects for Systems Change: A Toolkit for Funders and Partners is available online or email info@healthnexus.ca to request a copy.

Final Reflections

Over three years, five projects across Canada gained significant experience and insights for the complex work of partnerships for systems change. WAGE's new funding model supported a synergy of partner perspectives across diverse organizational mandates and structures to support women's participation in democratic and public life.

The partnerships had several important achievements, including:

- Stronger engagement and collaboration with a broader range of stakeholders.
- An increased capacity to bridge differences among their core partners.
- A better understanding of how to work in political environments.

At the same time, the partnerships showed how systemic change to achieve gender equity requires action at multiple levels, action which is ready to move beyond being perceived as exclusively 'women's work'.

Funders should be encouraged by the opportunities this model presents. With a few adaptations, based on the key learnings of this project, funders can resource effective and equitable partnership projects to increase women's participation in democratic and public life.

Excerpt from Poem: Women in Political Action



This poem is a tribute to the partnership project partners. It combines some of their most poignant quotes with themes from the evaluation research data. It illustrates the challenges involved in gender equity work as well as partners' perseverance and strengths in facing and addressing those challenges.

Julia Fursova, Ph.D., Research and Evaluation Lead

Women in Political Action

How to change the system
To empower women for political action,
While we deal with systemic oppression
Disguised under the “myth of equality”?

“So many people still ask why
We call for more women in politics”,
Women are allowed to be in this room,
What else do you want?
We are being nice to ‘Mary’.

‘Mary’ is a white, cis-, middle-class politician,
Which doesn’t make her a ‘bad person’,
Only a privileged one.
What is intersectionality?
Women who are other than ‘Mary’ –
Women of colour, trans, Indigenous,
queer, differently able –
To change the system
We need different women around the table.

Note: The name ‘Mary’ referenced in the poem is used generically. It does not refer to any specific person involved with the five partnership projects.

[To read the full poem, follow this link.](#)

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