Literature Review on Co-Leadership Models

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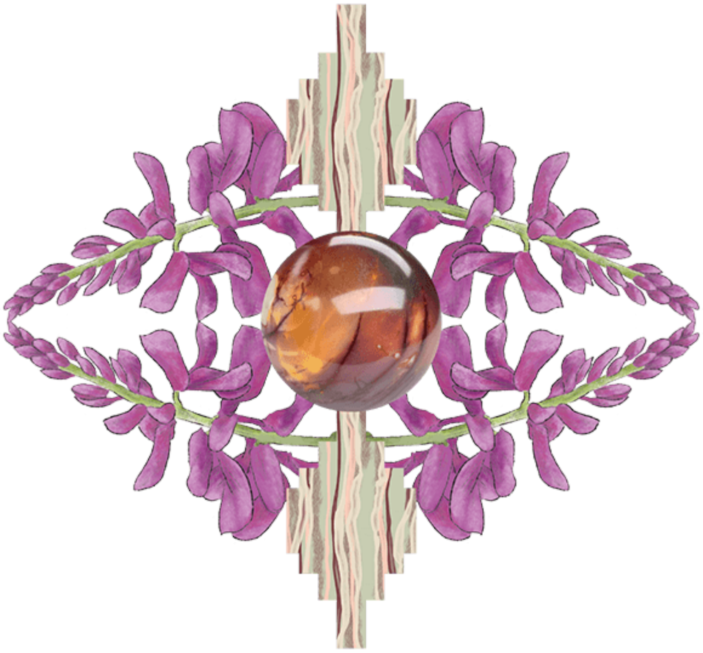

COMMISSIONED BY:
Devi Leiper O'Malley and Ruby Johnson as part of their research:
Mosaics and Mirrors; Insights and Practices on Feminist Co-Leadership

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1. Introduction

"None of us is as smart as all of us." – RICHARD OLSEN, SCHOLAR

This desk review offers an overview of concepts and current thought trends in existing literature and other resources in relation to feminist co-leadership models. Since feminist knowledge has always been shared in diverse ways, this review draws not only from formal literature, but also from blogs, video interviews, podcasts and organisational newsletters, published by leaders and about their co- and shared leadership experiences, both in feminist organisational and non-feminist corporate contexts.

First, a brief section on methodology is provided, which outlines the approach in undertaking this review. This includes an explanation of which key words were searched, where searches took place, and why. This section also sets out the limitations of the review and reasons for these.

Second, we note the complexity of conducting a review of the concept of co-leadership within a sea of managerial literature and organisational resources that branch from various conceptual starting points historically. Not only is there a vast array of terms used to describe notions of co-leadership, but these terms are also often used interchangeably. Moreover, while 'shared' and 'co-'leadership are used as terms in both feminist and non-feminist writings, there is little correlation in the purpose that informs such practices when comparing feminist and non-feminist perspectives.

Third, an overview is provided of some of the common conceptions of co- and shared leadership, including the benefits and challenges of co-leadership as articulated in academic studies of the phenomenon and other resources. From this overview, we turn specifically to the practices of co-leadership that have created mechanisms for enhanced effectiveness and greater political alignment.

Next, we will dive into the waters of feminist leadership, and examine more specifically how notions of shared leadership and participatory decision-making are embedded in the DNA of feminist organisational models. Fourthly, drawing from a monumental piece of writing on feminist leadership by feminist scholar-activist, Srilatha Batliwala (2010), we will apply her 'feminist leadership diamond' as a framework to the reflections available on feminist co-leadership, to better understand the necessary components for successful co-leadership through a feminist lens.

The final section acknowledges the relevance and importance of leadership transitions in feminist organisations, as political practices of transformational change, and an extension of feminist shared leadership models. Specifically, this section draws from existing documentation about three recent feminist leadership transitions, namely those of Association of Women in Development (AWID), FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund and Third Wave Fund.

The review ends with concluding remarks.

2. Methodology

"I've run a network of organisations before. If I do it again, I don't want to do it on my own."

– MARY JANE REAL, CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, URGENT ACTION FUND ASIA & PACIFIC

Searches for resources on feminist co-leadership took place on academic journal search engines, relevant blog sites, as well as on the webpages of feminist or women-led organisations who practice co-leadership. Limitations to the scope of this review relate to the vast array of definitions and terminology that is used to speak about the concept of co-leadership or shared leadership more broadly, as well as the scarce online documentation of feminist leadership theories and practices.

2.1 Finding resources

While literature was sought for using academic journal search engines, blog sites and organisation websites were also scanned for resources on shared and co-leadership.

Searches for academic literature took place in academic search engines and digital commons such as university publication lists. While a lot of writing on shared leadership is situated in education and health sectors, for the purposes of this review, articles on business management and organisational development were prioritised. Unfortunately, though perhaps unsurprisingly, literature available on shared leadership in managerial and organisational scholarship is overwhelmingly written by and centred on global North/Western stakeholders, with male leaders as the prime targets of their studies, and based on assumptions that effective leadership ultimately comes down to improving a business' bottom line.

News and blog sites that were scanned included feminist sites such as Everyday Feminism, Bitch Media, as well as non-feminist sites, such as Forbes, Harvard Business Review, TechCrunch and Nonprofit Quarterly. None of the feminist blog sites searched had relevant writing on organisational development and leadership. A quick search was also conducted on LinkedIn for blogs on co-leadership written by users. With the exception of a LinkedIn blog written by FRIDA, this search did not return high-quality results.

Lastly, individual websites of feminist organisations were scanned. These included organisations who were specifically practising co-leadership or shared leadership as a part of the organisational model, either through a feminist framework, or with two women as co-leaders. These organisation websites included those of AWID, Edge Funders Alliance, Third Wave, Urgent Action Fund – Asia Pacific (UAF-AP), Equality Fund, The Hive Fund, Greenpeace, Association for Progressive Communications (APC), FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund (FRIDA) and We Are Restless. Not all searches on organisations' websites retrieved results, which speaks to the stark availability of resources available on feminist co- and shared leadership, and the need to document these practices.

2.2 Filtering key concepts

Throughout the scanning process, terms searched for on the platforms mentioned included, 'co-leadership,' 'feminist co-leadership,' 'co-lead,' 'shared leadership,' 'feminist shared leadership,' 'feminist leadership,' 'feminist leadership transition,' 'participatory leadership' and 'participatory decision-making.'

Despite their potential relevance, terms I did not intentionally deeply explore included, 'horizontal leadership,' 'feminine leadership,' 'transformational leadership,' and any shared leadership frameworks outside of business management or organisational development literature. My reasons are explained below:

A quick scan of articles related to horizontal leadership revealed that these consisted mostly of attempting to compare horizontal leadership with 'vertical' leadership, or to give advice on how to 'balance' horizontal with vertical leadership. Due to the lack of political integration of context and feminist values in non-feminist articles, the findings proved by and large politically removed, repetitive and not useful for our purposes.

There also exists a body of literature around ‘feminine leadership,’ which generally attempts to push for the inclusion of more women in leadership capacities. However, these articles rest on problematic premises of the extent to which women bring different qualities to leadership (such as collaboration, relationship-building and care), which play into long-standing gender stereotypes. Such premises also essentialise women, even if unintentionally, and thus prove irrelevant to the purposes of this review.

Transformational leadership was first coined by American sociologist James Downton, and the term has since been juxtaposed with concepts such as transactional leadership. While the term holds resonance with feminist leadership more broadly, especially in thinking about how dominant leadership practices are embedded within our societies, no direct linkages in non-feminist management and organisational literature have been made between transformational and shared leadership models (certainly a gap in the literature!). Writings on feminist leadership, on the other hand, have contextualised shared leadership models within a feminist politics rather consistently, and so a deeper dig into literature on transformational leadership seemed redundant.

2.3 Research limitations

My search for resources on feminist co-leadership led me to search for very specific terms (listed above). Due to the vast array of terms used to describe variants of co- and shared leadership, I would not have picked up on and included resources that speak about co-leadership, but using different terminology, unless used interchangeably with co-leadership in an article that includes co-leadership as one of its key words.

Secondly, due to the vast number of definitions and terms used to describe forms of co-leadership, it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to define feminist co-leadership. The reality that there are “almost more definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” (Stogdill, 1974) has not gone unrecognised by feminist scholars (see for example, Batliwala, 2010; Jass Associates, 2017).

Over and above the vast number of definitions, feminist scholars are also acknowledging how unique every leadership model is for every feminist organisation. It is not fair to create a basket definition of a concept such as feminist leadership, when there is no one single conversation about it, but rather a multitude of conversations taking place across multiple contexts. Jass Associates have in fact produced a toolkit (Jass Associates, 2017) for groups wishing to decide on a definition for their feminist leadership.

Lastly, it must be acknowledged that feminist leadership has not been adequately documented, which limits the access we have to existing institutional knowledge. Batliwala describes the search for resources on feminist leadership as being “more challenging than one would imagine” (2010). This is exceptionally the case for feminist co-leadership, and even more so when seeking writings from the South. This does not mean that feminists have not grappled with the concept and practice of co-leadership. We have certainly been engaged more broadly with larger discussions around power, and have been actively occupied with integrating alternative, non-hierarchical decision-making processes into our organisational structures.

3. A (very) brief history of the key pieces of literature

“Understanding leadership as being about a person in charge is not wrong, but it is no longer adequate.”

– WILEY SOUBA, SCHOLAR

Leadership theory found in formal literature has by and large been shaped within a gendered worldview. A brief scan of leadership literature broadly reveals “countless narratives of exceptional, heroic men, whose work and family lives do not meet” (Batliwala, 2010). Overtime, understandings of what makes good leadership has shifted and expanded. Within this expansion, notions of co-leadership and shared leadership have emerged. Feminist leadership constructs have recently started to be developed within formal academic literature, with feminist co-leadership still being identified by practitioners as an emerging concept and practice.

The concept of co-leadership was first introduced by prominent leadership scholars Warren Bennis and David Heenan, who co-authored a book titled, *Co-Leaders: The Power of Great Partnerships* (1999). Among the aims of the book were to discredit the appraisal of the single heroic leader, as well as acknowledge the strong contributions a second leader brings to leadership practice. While there was an anticipation among scholars that the book would instigate widespread adoption of the co-leadership model (Yankee, 2017), thousands of years of cultural conditioning in favour of singular leadership proved harder to dismantle (O'Toole et al. 2002).

In 2003, Craig Pearce and Jay Conger published a book titled, *Shared leadership: Reframing the how's and why's of leadership*. The book sought to convey the reality of evolution within organisations, and the extent to which authority held in single individuals is no longer an effective leadership model (if it ever had been) in the face of such changes. Arguably, the concept of shared leadership had been in the shadows of literature around 'self-managing teams,' 'learning organisations' and transparent or 'open-book' management, in the decades before Pearce and Conger's 2003 publication (Tams, 2018).

Despite this documented history, it is important to acknowledge that shared leadership is not a new concept. Collective leadership has been a part of movements for a very long time and continues to be practised today in different communities around the world. It is therefore critical to understand that as we attempt to theorise around shared and co-leadership, "we are borrowing" from past knowledges and traditions (Abbas, in an interview by AWID, 2019). We see even the most reputable of our feminist thinkers and practitioners of shared leadership mistakenly refer to individual-led leadership as 'traditional,' and co-leadership as 'emergent.' We must remember the knowledge on which we build, even if – and especially if – that knowledge is not published in formal literature.

Women, in particular, have been organising through horizontal leadership structures, and non-hierarchical collectives and networks for decades, often rejecting the concept of 'leadership' entirely, as an embodiment of patriarchy and the monopolisation of power. 'Leadership' has become a more prominent word in feminist vocabulary only in the last few years (Sawer and Andrew, 2013). It is suggested that an essay by American feminist, Jo Freeman, entitled, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, published in the 1970s, was a key reference piece for the development of 'democratic' processes and formalised leadership structures in feminist organising happening in Western countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States (Sawer and Andrew, 2013).

The limitations of 'structurelessness' and the inherent informal power relations that emerge within women's organising that Freeman describes, has been greatly expanded on since then by feminist scholars writing about the realms and types of power in feminist organisations (see for example, Veneklasen and Miller, 2002; and Rao and Kelleher, 2000). A concept paper written in 2010 by Indian feminist scholar and activist, Srilatha Batliwala, and commissioned by CREA, entitled, *Feminist Leadership for social transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud*, was the first piece of literature of its kind to "nail the jelly to the wall" (Batliwala, 2010), by comprehensively attempting to define and articulate what feminist leadership is and does.

While no literature has been published to date on feminist co-leadership models explicitly, Batliwala's piece on feminist leadership does indeed delve deeply into the politics inherent in feminist values and principles of organising, which include an explicit intention to distribute and share power, practice consensus-building and organise collectively. It is, to date, arguably the most comprehensive written work on feminist leadership, and is thus a secure framework on which to build our understanding of effective feminist co-leadership practice.

Interestingly, despite their scarcity, resources on feminist organisations' transitions to feminist co-leadership models have been published just as much as resources on the practices or experiences of feminist co-leadership itself. These have come in the form of a blog by the former board co-chairs of FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund (FRIDA) (Pierre-Antoine, 2019), interviews (see Mic Check! Podcast, 2019; and ReproJobs, 2020) with the outgoing director of Third Wave Fund, and a formal publication, co-authored by outgoing director of AWID, Lydia Alpízar Durán, and consultant Barbara Williams, entitled, *Feminist Dances with Power* (2019), which documents AWID's transition process and learnings.

Resources specifically about the practices and experiences of co-leadership were found in a podcast with co-directors of We are Restless, entitled, *Feminist Co-leadership in COVID19: With Gemma Graham and Kate Muhwezi* (We are Restless, 2021); as well as a video interview with AWID's co-directors Cindy Clark and Hakima Abbas, in which they speak together about their experience co-leading the organisation (AWID, 2019). Lastly, an article titled, *Building the bicycle while we ride it: Five reflections on nonprofit co-leadership* (2017), was co-authored by the previous co-directors of FRIDA, Devi Leiper O'Malley and Ruby Johnson.

While the development of concepts around co- and shared leadership in the literature is relatively new, more can and needs to be done about documenting long-standing practices of shared leadership in the global South. Resources on feminist co-leadership practices have become available in the last four years, suggesting a trajectory of future growth in relevance and political purpose.

4. Common conceptions of co-leadership

“Being able to check our self-doubt or indignation with each other makes us better people.”

– DEVI LEIPER O’MALLEY, FORMER CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FRIDA THE YOUNG FEMINIST FUND

While a definition of the terms shared and co-leadership are beyond the scope of this paper, there are a few common understandings regarding their nature, their benefits and their challenges. While many definitions and terms exist to describe what co-leadership is, it is widely considered in the literature as a model whose benefits far outweigh the potential challenges.

4.1 On terminology

There exists a multitude of terminology in leadership literature used to describe and articulate varying conceptualisations of co-leadership, and more broadly, shared leadership. These terms include, distributed leadership, joint leadership, dual leadership, collective leadership, collaborative leadership, participatory leadership and matrix leadership, to name a few.

Moreover, while some scholars have taken to splitting hairs by attempting to provide an overview of existing terms and suggest separate definitions for each, at the same time, there exist scholars who use the different terms interchangeably. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms co-leadership when referring to two or more people sharing equal positions of authority within an organisation, and shared leadership as a system-wide organisational practice, which includes co-leadership and distributed leadership within the organisation more broadly.

Lastly, it is important to note that leadership cannot be assumed to be shared or distributed in mainstream writing on leadership, unless explicitly stated as such. However, feminist leadership, by virtue of being ‘feminist,’ is consistently written about as a practice that entails the distribution of power and sharing of leadership, whether or not it is made explicit.

4.2 The nature of shared and co-leadership

Co-leadership, shared leadership and how they are understood

Co-leadership involves an equal sharing of roles and responsibilities at the director and executive level (Troiano, 1999). This is particularly true in feminist resources on co-leadership. Having said this, there is also a body of (non-feminist) literature that defines co-leadership as hierarchical, whereby the 'co-leader' is subordinate to the executive director (in the case of a co-leadership comprised of a Chief Executive Officer and a Chief Operations Officer, for example). However, this hierarchical understanding is by no means consistent across literature.

Shared leadership is a system-wide organisational practice (Pearce and Conger, 2003). Similarly, distributed leadership is described not as something done by an individual 'to' others, but rather as a group activity that works through relationships (Bennett et al. 2003). We see this particularly in feminist perspectives on shared leadership, where opportunities are deliberately created for the whole organisation to lead together – leadership is not a task for co-leaders alone (Williams et al. 2018).

It is also generally agreed that the ways in which leadership can be shared once it has expanded beyond an individual position is almost infinite (Allison et al. 2018). This may explain the large array of constellations of shared leadership identified and described in the literature. As we will expand on later, feminist organisations practicing shared leadership acknowledge this wide array of possibility through deliberate experimentation of different structures and methods of shared leadership, understanding feminist leadership as "a practice-in-progress" (Williams et al. 2018). Feminist organisations also tend to practice flexibility: being open to shifts in responsibilities between those leading.

Contextualising leadership within the system of an organisation

Across descriptions of different terminologies is the idea that "leadership is not the monopoly or responsibility of just one person" (Bolden, 2011). Reflections on shared, distributed and co-leadership have shifted the representation of leadership from being embedded in the attributes and behaviours of an individual, 'heroic' leader, to being embedded within a system, whereby leadership is understood as a collective and interpersonal process (Bolden, 2011; Barker 2001).

Spillane (2006) describes this shift as "situated" within a broader system. This contextualisation of leadership within the system of an organisation is a step forward in mainstream literature, especially when considering how non-feminist accounts of leadership tend to analyse the phenomenon in a vacuum. A critical characteristic of feminist leadership is their awareness of context, and the deliberate contextualisation of leadership practices within broader societal constructs that perpetuate patriarchy and other intersections of oppression.

4.3 Benefits of co-leadership

Mainstream thought on co-leadership by and large promote it by arguing that the conventional perspective that an individual leader can possess all the skills required to manage increasingly complex and adaptive organisations is outdated (Yankee, 2017). Better leadership models are out there. For feminist organisations, co-leadership resonates with their values around sharing power, creating change from within, and also with their ethics around creating a thriving, healthy workplace for all members of staff.

An overview of the literature would suggest that the benefits of co-leadership include better decision-making, increased effectiveness, more opportunities for organisational development, healthier, happier organisational culture, and increased mental wellbeing of co-leaders.

Better decision-making

Co-leadership has proven to yield better decision-making for a number of reasons (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). Firstly, co-leadership offers checks and balances through collaborative decision-making and bringing sometimes conflicting perspectives into alignment with one another (Yankee, 2017). A number of scholars have also written about the benefits of conflict in leadership (for example, Mashburn and Vaught, 1980) for its capacity to open up processes of listening, deeper analysis and shared understanding.

Furthermore, co-leadership offers “cognitive heterogeneity” (Yankee, 2017), bringing a greater diversity of ideas to the table. At the same time, the relationship that co-leaders have nurtures a safe sounding board, offering constructive disagreement or refinement of ideas that lead to great decisions (Schildkrout, 2014).

Increased effectiveness

A popular argument among mainstream scholars for the adoption of co-leadership is that it is simply more effective. This is particularly against the backdrop of increasing complexity facing organisations and the subsequent extent of demands placed on leadership. Managing those demands by sharing them with a partner just makes more sense (Vine et al. 2008). In fact, a study undertaken in 2002 (Pearce and Sims) found shared leadership to be a useful predictor of effectiveness within an organisation.

Furthermore, a study of corporate organisations undertaken in 2009 (Wagner and Miller) found co-leaders who felt well-teamed to be “substantially more engaged at work,” and that their businesses had “better safety, retention, creativity, productivity and profitability.” One co-director, who authored a reflective blog on co-leadership (Schildkrout, 2014), stated that collaboration between two leaders results in “more creative, better-vetted, more strategic solutions.”

More opportunities for organisational development

One of the leading reasons that co-leadership enables more opportunities for organisational development is that risk-taking is enhanced under a strong co-leadership. Co-leaders feel more confident taking risks due to the additional dialogue, analysis and support two leaders bring to the process (Alvarez and Svejenova, 2005). Greenpeace Board Chair, Ana Toni, explained in a press statement (Greenpeace, 2016) that enhanced resilience was the core motive for the organisation to transition into a co-leadership model.

Furthermore, co-leaders not only bring complementary and contrasting perspectives to the table (Yankee, 2017), but also have a tendency to bring to the table “the collective wisdom of the organisation they are running” (Troiano, 1999) in shared leadership models. This only enhances the capacity for innovation (Newton, 2015).

Lastly, shared leadership has enhanced organisational development, due to its practice often leading to structural changes within organisations. Structures of organisations change (Allison et al. 2018; and Williams, 2018) as they think about how to expand the concept of shared leadership to the board and other parts of the organisation.

Happier, healthier organisations

A co-leadership model supports a healthy work environment that is aligned with democratic principles of inclusiveness, participation and empowerment (Allison et al. 2018). Co-leadership enables staff to have access to a greater well of leadership (Shildkrout, 2014), who are able to get advice from two different leaders.

Shildkrout further explains how, in his experience as a co-leader, “two of [them] were more empathetic” towards staff members facing particular issues “than either one might be.” Troiano further suggests (1999) that co-leadership shifts the management of staff to an “inquiry-based supervisory style,” as opposed to top-down commanding,

For the co-leaders themselves, sharing responsibilities and sharing accomplishments enhance co-leaders’ senses of wellbeing at work (Bennis and Heenan, 1999). Co-leaders are able to support one another in attending to responsibilities, but also celebrate together when making accomplishments.

Increased mental wellbeing of co-leaders

Co-leadership enables co-leaders to experience a sense of “unity, kinship and alliance” and a “mutually nourishing process of working and learning” (Williams, 2018). In a study in which co-leaders were interviewed (Yankee, 2017), one co-director described the relationship with his co-leader as “walk-in therapy,” acknowledging his access to a sympathetic ear and sounding board, a resource that a single leader would not necessarily have access to in their organisation.

A co-leadership model also enables “critical cycles of rest and replenishment” (Shildkrout, 2014) as one co-leader is able to hold the fort for the other when in need of a break. The support that co-leaders provide one another also decreases stress and burnout, due to an expanded leadership capacity, especially in shared leadership models. Cindy Clark, co-director of AWID, in a recent interview, described the feedback and support she gets from her co-leader, Hakima Abbas, as “helpful and affirming.” It is a relief to know that Hakima is in it alongside her in difficult moments (AWID, 2019).

Previous co-director of FRIDA, Ruby Johnson, says, “A co-leadership model really offers built-in peer mentoring. We each have, and serve as, a safety net, someone to stop you from going over the edge, to hold you accountable, and keep you sane” (Leiper O’Malley and Johnson, 2017).

While it is remarkably clear that the benefits of co-leadership are far beyond those that are economic, even on economic grounds, the extent to which co-leadership enhances so many aspects of the organisation fuels a strong case for co-leadership providing a return on investment that far outweighs its cost.

4.4 Challenges of co-leadership

Being a new leader of an organisation – be it as a co-leader or an individual – already comes with its own set of challenges. A strong co-leadership shields and protects co-leaders from burnout, pressure in times of uncertainty and stress. However, a co-leadership in which co-leaders are unreflexive about their personal and interpersonal weaknesses can result in the deterioration of the organisation’s wellbeing, and co-leaders’ ability to lead effectively.

An overview of the literature would suggest that some of the key pitfalls that co-leaderships experience are competition, unclear separation of roles and responsibilities, a weak outward display of unity, lack of communication and lastly, forced pairings.

Competition between co-leaders

Bearing in mind that the majority of literature examining co-leadership revolved around studies of corporate organisations, whose senses of purpose are far removed from those of feminist organisations, or even social justice organisations more broadly, a frequently reported pitfall of co-leaders' ability to lead effectively was competition between one another.

Competition tended to affect the effectiveness of co-leadership when there existed fear of unfair recognition given to the other co-leader (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010), or 'clashes of ego' (Yankee, 2017) in moments of disagreement. Co-leaders' inability to compromise would result in a loss of organisational focus (Arena et al., 2011), jeopardising the smooth-running of the organisation.

Before we write this challenge off as one only experienced in corporate settings, its reality calls for reflection around how habits and assumptions about the glory of individualism, 'winning' and the characteristics of personal success are internalised by leaders in feminist organisations too. Attempting to embed the progressive practice of shared leadership within an organisation whose context still praises the heroic leader requires much unlearning.

Unclear separation of roles and responsibilities

While there are various methods and preferences for splitting the responsibilities between two co-leaders, challenges arise when the separation is unclear (Yankee, 2017). This lack of clarity can lead to role ambiguity (Mashburn and Vaught, 1980), as well as a lack of accountability, due to the diffusion of responsibilities (Troiano, 1999).

Weak outward display of unity

Conflict and disagreement inevitably occurs between co-leaders. While disagreement is, if anything, considered healthy, it becomes a problem when that conflict is displayed publicly or towards staff. An outward display of conflict can reveal a lack of respect for the other co-leader (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). Moreover, the lack of an evident united front can encourage staff to play one co-leader against the other, whereby a staff member may attempt to seek a different outcome by approaching one co-leader over the other.

In a study undertaken in 2002, scholars concluded interestingly that while the division of responsibilities between co-leaders is important for effective leadership, it is not as critical as communicating those roles effectively to the organisation at large (O'Toole et al., 2002).

Co-director of AWID, Cindy Clark, shared her experience of the challenge that comes with disagreement (AWID, 2019): "Because there are two of us, we need to take care not to get played off on each other. We have different opinions, it's part of the richness, but we have to know when it's important to have a unifying voice, and when to say, 'I feel this way, Hakima feels this way, and let's figure this out together.' It's part of the learning and the work."

Lack of communication
A number of studies revealed poor communication between co-leaders as a pitfall. The failure to establish or maintain open, two-way communication results in distrust (Yankee, 2017). It also creates a tendency for disagreements based on personal experiences or perspectives that hold no relevance to the issue needing to be discussed (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010).

Forced pairings
A study of various corporate organisations with co-leadership structures (Yankee, 2017) resonated with the findings of previous writings on the topic (for example, Heenan and Bennis, 1999) that suggest that two co-leaders forced to work together – be it as a result of convenience or the preference of other stakeholders – rarely stay together. "We have to find each other," stated one interview participant (Yankee, 2017).

It is important to note that the scarcity of documented insight around the recruitment of co-leaders presents a barrier to the ready adoption of co-leadership as a legitimate model for organisations seeking to be more adaptive and sustainable (ibid.).

Despite the majority of literature being based on the study of corporate organisations, many of the challenges and pitfalls to co-leadership described therein are relevant for feminist co-leadership in organisations too. A deeper application of a feminist framework for co-leadership can assist us now in understanding further how to recognise and dissolve such challenges when they arise, as well as set up co-leadership practices that resonate with and support our feminist political agenda.

5. Diving into feminist leadership

"One image for me that encompasses our journey at FRIDA is the idea of jumping into the unknown, like jumping off a beautiful cliff with warm turquoise waters below."

– RUBY JOHNSON, FORMER CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FRIDA THE YOUNG FEMINIST FUND

Analysing shared and co-leadership through a feminist lens invites us to take a necessary step further than mainstream conceptualisations. It requires us to ground our theories within the contexts that co-leadership is practised. While no scholars have attempted to articulate the feminist co-leadership construct in formal literature as yet, there are increasing examples of feminist co-leaders within feminist organisations across the world, who are purposefully reflecting on, refining and attempting to articulate the feminist co-leadership they practice.[1]

5.1 Differentiating feminist leadership from mainstream conceptualisations

While there are many definitions of feminist leadership that have taken shape over the last three decades (see Batliwala, 2010), a common thread amongst them is that they articulate leadership explicitly in relation to power and politics. This is a refreshing distinction from mainstream definitions of leadership that seem to view the nature of leadership as separate from the context in which it is enacted.

A second key distinction between feminist and non-feminist conceptualisations of leadership is feminist leadership's refusal to separate the means and ends of leadership (Sawer and Andrew, 2013). For feminist leaders, the impact of their organisations can only result in inclusion, participation and collaboration outside of the organisation if those same attributes are applied to practices within the organisation.

5.2 Integrating concepts of shared and co-leadership into existing feminist frameworks

In Batliwala's flagship conceptual framework on feminist leadership (2010), she describes feminist leadership for social transformation as having four essential components, which she terms the 'Four P's.' These include power, principles and values, politics and purpose, and practices, which form what Batliwala refers to as a 'feminist leadership diamond.'

The concept paper challenges the seemingly ubiquitous assumption that strong, coherent leadership can only be embodied in an individual leader, and acknowledges the well-documented existence of successful networks and collectives with "highly dispersed and non-individualistic leadership" embedded within the histories of our movements. However, no analysis of co- or shared leadership is given in her concept paper explicitly, which presents itself as an opportunity for continued building upon the analysis she started.

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[1] See appendix for a list of feminist and women-led organisations currently practicing co-leadership

In the section to follow, we will use the ‘feminist leadership diamond,’ or the ‘Four P’s’ as a framework for assessing the different aspects of what makes feminist co-leadership effective.

6. The four P’s: Using the ‘feminist leadership diamond’ as a framework for understanding effective co-leadership

“We need to be the funder that’s willing to throw their weight behind the things we believe in. If we don’t upset some folks, we’re not doing our job. We’re not here to keep philanthropy happy. It’s not our job to make people comfortable. It’s our job to point out flaws in the system that don’t get named because there’s too much at stake to name them in spaces they need to reach.”

– RYE YOUNG, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THIRD WAVE FUND

In Batliwala’s concept paper on feminist leadership (2010), she creates a framework for understanding feminist leadership being made up of four components: power, principles and values, politics and purpose, and practice. This ‘feminist leadership diamond’ creates a lens through which we can critically analyse the reflections shared in available resources on co-leadership and assess which practices resonate with and are effective for the transformative impact we wish to make through the work of our organisations.

Leadership – feminist or otherwise – is first and foremost about power (Batliwala, 2010). For feminist organisations, “leaders work from a vision of shared power” (DAWN Ontario, 2008). Co-leadership, from a feminist perspective, is a means of realising that vision.

Secondly, the principles and values of feminist leadership include participatory decision-making, inclusion, care and flexibility, among others. Co-leaders' accounts of their experiences of shared leadership commonly refer to how a co-leadership model opens up the space within the structure of the organisation to practise these principles authentically, in various ways.

Thirdly, politics and purpose are what sets feminist leadership apart from other forms of leadership. A co-leadership model enables organisations to engage in leadership practices as a means and not an end. In many ways, choosing to adopt a co-leadership model is an act of putting our money where our mouth is. It sends a clear message that we believe shared leadership really works.

Lastly, effective co-leadership practices reflect and affirm the politics, principles and applications of power that feminist organisations endeavour to see manifest within their organisations and in their work.

6.1 Power in feminist co-leadership

Unsurprisingly, every feminist co-leader whose reflections informed this review expressed an explicit sense of responsibility to disrupt power monopolies and distribute power. One way of realising this goal is for organisations to build collective power through shared leadership, not only at the executive director level, but into other levels of their organisational structure as well (examples of such organisations are FRIDA, AWID and APC). Secondly, co-leaders are effective when they pay attention to the 'deep structure' of power within their organisations (Rao and Kelleher, 1999) and how their actions and those of their staff play a role in either disrupting or perpetuating the often-hidden power that plays out at that level.

The responsibility to disrupt, distribute and build collective power

It was precisely AWID's commitment to build collective power that inspired the organisation to begin experimenting with a practice of shared leadership (Williams, 2018). Shared leadership practices are effective when leaders acknowledge their hierarchical position in an organisation and use that power to act on the consensus of their organisation in decision-making.

Participatory decision-making in feminist organisations is often a symbol of building collective power. However, feminist economist, Devaki Jain, effectively articulates how "participation in decision-making does not necessarily include, or address, the power hierarchy. One could be part of a decision-making process and not be powerful enough to influence that decision. Leadership, on the other hand has hierarchical significance" (Jain, 1996).

Hakima Abbas, co-director of AWID, explained how leadership should be shared beyond the co-leadership model (AWID, 2019):

> We didn't want shared leadership to stop at the ED level, but to deepen throughout the organisation, creating processes and structures that allow people to take up leadership from wherever they sit… we concentrated on what it means to manage in a shared leadership model. How do managers encourage and enable staff to feel like they hold responsibility and ownership over the work they do? We are not a horizontal organisation. That has been evolving. We still find snags. We are cognizant of being a learning organisation."

Similarly, Ruby Johnson, previous co-director of FRIDA, explained that her role as a co-leader had involved "being deliberate about opening space for [their] other staff members, advisors and grantees to take up space… modelling collective leadership" (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017).

Building collective power in feminist organisations is thus essentially about creating a structure that enables shared leadership. As Tams (2018) effectively articulated, "leadership in its most evolved incarnation becomes paradoxical."

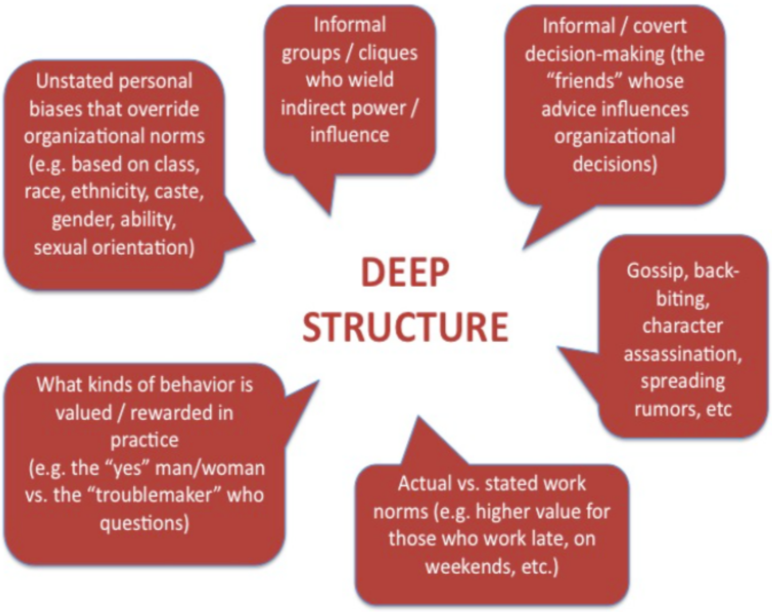
Power at the 'deep structure' level of organisations

While an overview of the different types of power exercised in organisations is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to know that organisations are microcosms of the social and political power dynamics that make up their contexts.

Internal power dynamics are particularly difficult for co-leaders of feminist organisations to manage, for at least three reasons. Firstly, as Rao and Kelleher explain, these dynamics often influence organisational behaviour "below the level of consciousness." Secondly, while we know that we bring our biases, social conditioning and experiences with power into the organisations in which we work, as feminists, it is hard for us to admit we hold or reproduce them, especially since we see ourselves as the ones who are actively trying to dismantle manifestations of oppressive power (Batliwala, 2010).

Thirdly, for feminist organisations that attempt to create 'flat' structures or explicitly practice participatory decision-making, power dynamics operating at deeper levels of the organisation are even more complex. Hierarchies and power structures emerge in these structures regardless, but "operate at the level of deep structure, making them more difficult to see, address or transform" (Batliwala, 2010). However, unless the organisation's visible structure enables open processing of internal tensions, the deep structure can become a site of "resistance, subversion and sabotage" (ibid.).

'Deep structure,' coined by Rao and Kelleher (1999), refers to the hidden sites and processes of power and influence – what Batliwala describes as 'the elephant in the room' (2010) – and is where the culture of an organisation is embedded and reproduced. The symptoms of deep structure are best exemplified in this image (*Figure 1*, in Batliwala, 2010, p. 22):


DEEP STRUCTURE
Unstated personal biases that override organizational norms (e.g. based on class, race, ethnicity, caste, gender, ability, sexual orientation)
Informal groups / cliques who wield indirect power / influence
Informal / covert decision-making (the "friends" whose advice influences organizational decisions)
Gossip, back-biting, character assassination, spreading rumors, etc
Actual vs. stated work norms (e.g. higher value for those who work late, on weekends, etc.)
What kinds of behavior is valued / rewarded in practice (e.g. the "yes" man/woman vs. the "troublemaker" who questions)

For co-leaders, one way in which deep structure manifests is as a result of distrust between them. When distrust is not discussed openly, this perpetuates hidden power tensions. A question one co-leader asked while interviewed in a study (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010) demonstrates the kinds of fears associated with open discussion around the issue: "Why would you increase the likelihood of failure by discussing the details of a lack of confidence in the relationship?"

Another tension that operates at the deep structure level is competition or a sense of needing to prove oneself between co-leaders, which stems both from social conditioning around what leadership looks like (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010), as well as feelings of insecurity as one co-leader compares herself to the other (Sally, 2002). Creating space for vulnerability disrupts unhealthy power dynamics playing out at the deep structure level and replaces 'ego' with collaboration and willingness to support one another (Yankee, 2017). As Devi Leiper O'Malley, previous co-director of FRIDA shares, "I've learned to share my worries with Ruby, which, to be honest, was hard at first, because if there is anyone I want to prove myself to, it's my co-leader!"

A key method for disrupting hidden power playing out at the deep structure level is by visibilising it. For Cindy Clark and Hakima Abbas, co-directors of AWID, this means continuous conversation. Talking about the strengths and challenges that the intersecting identities of each co-leader brings to the organisation, Abbas explains, "We had conversations about [our intersecting identities]: what does that mean internally, what does that mean externally, and were able to talk about our experiences in the workplace and the movement and be blunt about power and privilege and how that plays out. It's not a one-time conversation, it's a continuous conversation."

Co-founders and directors of Raising Voices, Lori Michau and Dipak Naker, explained how their leadership relies on solid communication, not only between themselves, but between staff as well. According to Shawna Wakefield who interviewed them (Wakefield, 2017), leadership relating to conflict resolution processes are distributed across the organisation, where previously that responsibility was held by the co-directors. Staff are encouraged to speak directly to one another, and if further support such as mediation is needed, other staff who hold leadership in this area are able to help.

Lastly, disrupting power tensions playing out at the deep structure level requires a practice of care between co-leaders (AWID, 2019). Hakima Abbas explains the importance of holding care for one another. For her, care is about feeling "supported and encouraged to thrive in this role by the other person" (AWID, 2019). The experiences of the previous co-directors of FRIDA resonate with this in a co-authored article (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017), where they add the need to "look after each other" and prioritise their collective well-being as aspects of effective co-leadership.

6.2 Principles and values in feminist co-leadership

Of the vast array of feminist principles and values that inform feminist leadership, a co-leadership model encompasses many of them. These include principles of participation, inclusion, work-life balance, transparent decision-making, rethinking organisational structure and shared authority (including responsibility, accountability and access to resources) (Batliwala, 2010).

As expressed by the board chair of Greenpeace International, Ana Toni, the organisation's move to a co-leadership model in 2016 was "consistent with [their] general shift away from being a highly centralised, hierarchical organisation to one that is leaderful: one in which everyone is empowered and where responsibilities are shared" (Greenpeace International, 2016).

While co-leadership, by nature, incorporates the abovementioned feminist principles, a number of further principles, when carried into co-leadership practices, enhance effectiveness. While the list below is by no means comprehensive, the following principles came up frequently in the resources studied:

Trust

Trust is a principle that showed up as important for co-leaders to share in nearly every resource that contributed to this review. However, few confronted how to achieve it. While trust is not necessarily a value that is easy to apply to any working relationship, certain practices have been observed to enhance the existence of trust between co-leaders. These included:

- A consistent public display of support of one another, and never speaking negatively of one another to others, even if there exists disagreement in private (Yankee, 2017).
- Taking risks together and explicitly supporting experimentation (Allison et al., 2018)
- Affirming one's commitment to a common goal (Yankee, 2017)

Humility

Described by a number of scholars as 'humility,' co-leaders are more effective when they are able to put their egos aside (O'Toole et al., 2002) and encourage one another to thrive (AWID, 2019). Humility was practised by giving credit to the other for shared achievements, and at the same time sharing the blame or criticism when things go wrong (O'Toole et al., 2002). Learning "how to handle the division of credit" is "perhaps more important than the division of tasks" (ibid.).

Placing equal value on all parts of the work

While the work of co-leaders spans across various programmatic and core responsibilities, it is all interrelated (Urgent Action Fund – Asia Pacific, [no date]). Placing equal value on all tasks creates a mutual feeling of collaboration and co-creation.

Collective care

In an interview, Hakima Abbas, co-director of AWID, spoke about the time it takes to actually get to know your co-leader and understand where she is coming from. She emphasised the importance of being gentle with one another: "We soon realised that not being gentle was not sustainable, nor a good use of our time" (AWID, 2019). Speaking to the importance of practising self- and collective care in organisations, outgoing executive director of Third Wave Fund, Rye Young, mentioned the need to "bring our bodies and minds into our ideas of success and frame it that way" (Mic Check! Podcast, 2019).

One question the co-directors of AWID often get asked is whether co-leaders need to be friends. Hakima explained how she and her co-leader distinguish friendship from care: "You do not have to be friends, but you do need to care about one another" (AWID, 2019). Co-leader of We Are Restless, Kate Muhwezi admits that, before becoming co-leaders, her and Gemma Graham "did not necessarily get along together" (We Are Restless, 2021). Yet "co-leadership is what broke those barriers and healed self-made wounds" (ibid.). Both expressed much gratitude for and the necessity of the support each gave the other during difficult personal moments brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic (ibid.).

Shared leadership and celebration

Lastly, when shared leadership as a principle informs the tasks and processes co-leaders undertake, growth and sustainability of the individuals and the organisation are supported (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019). Shared leadership is grounded in the belief that "people work best in relation to, not only directed by others," and involves inclusive, participatory and democratic relationships (ibid.).

Acknowledging the respective contributions made by each co-leader and members of staff practising leadership more generally (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019), is an important principle for effective co-leadership. No matter the extent to which leadership is shared, every individual has a need to feel acknowledged (O'Toole et al. 2002).

Previous co-directors of FRIDA speak to the simple truth that their leadership "rollercoaster" is stronger due to the "incredible commitment and dedication of the team of young feminists [they] have the privilege of working with" (Lieper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017). In a co-authored article, they rightfully exclaimed, "collective knowledge, power and celebration are everything!" (ibid.).

6.3 Politics and purpose in feminist co-leadership

Politics and purpose are what distinguish feminist leadership from all other forms of leadership (including 'women's leadership' or 'feminine leadership' (Batliwala, 2010)), because it explicitly adopts a feminist political agenda. This agenda informs the way feminist organisations work in the world, but is also embedded in the structure and practices within organisations themselves. To this end, co-leadership, for those feminist organisations who have adopted the model, is a direct means of embedding a feminist political agenda into the structure of their organisations and enhancing their resilience.

Co-leadership as a manifestation of a feminist political agenda

When Third Wave Fund announced their adoption of a co-leadership model in 2018, former board co-chair, Deesha Narichania, spoke to the political relevance of this decision, saying that it “embodies” the values of intersectionality and collaboration “and enshrines them” (Third Wave Fund, 2018). Ana Conner and Kiyomi Fujikawa, co-directors of Third Wave Fund, shared their perspective, “A co-directorship embodies collectivity, sustainability and opportunities for growth and co-learning, which are all things that we are committed to” (ibid.).

Similarly, Sophia Pierre-Antoine, co-chair at FRIDA, expressed how co-leadership at FRIDA epitomises the feminist politics of the organisation and is an act of resistance to neoliberal capitalist agendas (2019):

> “The term “feminist leadership” is an often loaded and co-opted term. We found that in certain spaces, it has become a political term pushed forward by capitalist ideologies, especially neoliberal agendas that praise individualistic career promotions, anti-communitarian leadership and women’s tokenistic representation in decision making levels. This is one of the reasons why we believe FRIDA needs to exist: to demonstrate radical feminist politics through a model of co-leadership and community-driven governance in order to make a significant impact in the philanthropic ecosystem - and the world.”

Another example is Hive Fund, whose co-directors, Melanie Allen and Erin Rogers, said about their partnership, “We hope to model the deep collaboration across difference that’s possible when we’re intentional about disrupting white supremacy culture and leaning into our values in every aspect of our work” (May, 2021).

Co-leadership, cultures of learning and resilience

Interestingly, those feminist organisations who have adopted a co-leadership model are ones who also explicitly try to ground their work within a culture of learning and experimentation (examples include AWID, FRIDA and UAF-AP).

In an explanation about their approach to their work, UAF-AP, an organisation “guided by” values of “collaboration and co-creation,” believes that “purpose- and values-driven experimentation can lead to breakthroughs that will lead [them] to the transformative change [they] ultimately seek” (UAF-AP, [no date]). A co-leadership model, for UAF-AP, was part of the organisation’s work towards developing an organisational system that “supports emergent learning.” For Mary

Jane Real and Virisila Buadromo, co-directors of UAF-AP, co-leadership enables "resilience" through "innovative work arrangements" and a practice of "co-responsibility." It is a way for the organisation to "walk [their] talk, by internalising a feminist ethics of care" (Real and Buadramo, 2019).

Just as a co-leadership model supports learning and experimentation, a culture of experimentation also supports effective co- and shared leadership. "For the process and practice [of shared leadership] to continue to grow" at AWID, the organisation recognises the need "to continue to find more opportunities to experiment and provide ongoing support for learning" (Williams et al. 2018). Previous co-director of FRIDA, Devi Leiper O'Malley explains that while they were "still working on how to best manage this culture of experimentation so that when [they] fail, [they] 'fail fast,'" embracing this culture amplifies "the inner creativity and resilience of each staff member" (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017) and other members across their shared leadership organisational structure.

For Batliwala learning and feminist leadership go hand in hand. "Leadership development must... bring to the surface and equip people to articulate their politics and purpose in clear, conscious ways" (Batliwala, 2010). Learning and experimentation equip staff in organisations with shared leadership models, and thereby builds leadership development. At the same time, a co-leadership model gives co-leaders the space to grow into their leadership. According to co-directors Ana Conner and Kiyomi Fujikawa, the space for co-leaders to grow is "what is beautiful about a co-director model" (Third Wave Fund, 2018).

6.4 Practices of co-leadership for success

Practices of feminist co-leadership enhance the success of that leadership when considerations regarding power, politics and purpose, and principles and values are integrated into the way co-leaders work with one another. While some practices were already mentioned in "Principles and values" as examples of what feminist organisations are doing to achieve those principles, other practices for success include the following:

Being clear on how responsibilities and accountabilities are shared
Co-leadership certainly requires sharing ownership of the overall goals and mission of the organisation, but it also requires co-leaders to divide responsibilities, decision-making and accountability. For this to happen, it is important to understand one another's strengths and expertise (Newton, 2015), but also to be honest with oneself about one's own weaknesses (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017; and Schildkrout, 2014).

While there are various ways for dividing tasks, the method does not matter so much as ensuring clarity about each co-leader's roles. This requires consistent communication, not only when moments of crises or new tasks emerge (O'Toole et al., 2002). Co-leadership becomes sustainable when co-leaders are able to honestly re-evaluate their roles and effectiveness (Newton, 2015) on a regular basis.

Clarity is also required in this regard over "what decisions you share and which you do not" (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017). While some decisions were made together, the previous co-leaders of FRIDA made use of various charts and tools to clearly map out where each one's responsibilities and accountabilities lie. "Having this clarity supports our own efficiency as a team, and enables us to trust each other on a regular basis" (ibid.)

Reflections shared by co-leaders themselves emphasised the importance of dividing accountability. Schildkrout (2014) advises to "almost always" opt for being left out over shared accountability. According to his experience, "Without extremely refined skill, shared accountability means less accountability... you have to trust each other" (Shildkrout, 2014).

Devi Leiper O'Malley, previous co-director of FRIDA shared how she and Ruby Johnson would regularly make decisions together, but if the conversation got too long, would say to one another, 'This is what I think, but it's your call.' "Having this clarity supports our own efficiency as a team, and enables us to trust each other on a regular basis (Leiper O'Malley, 2017).

Lastly, it is important for the rest of the organisation to also have clarity on which co-leader is responsible for what (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010), so that they know who to turn to when needed.

...But also, being flexible!

While having clarity over the division of responsibilities is important for effective co-leadership, allowing for that division to shift is just as important (Allison et al. 2018; and Yankee, 2017). Cindy Clark, co-director of AWID, explains that the way responsibilities are shared between herself and Hakima Abbas has "evolved and changed over time," and is also a learning process (AWID, 2019).

Co-leadership does not happen in a bubble and needs to be responsive to changing contexts. These include different circumstances, internally and externally that may arise, and it also includes changing personal ambitions of the co-leaders (Newton, 2015). Over time, it is inevitable that the skills and interests of co-leaders grow. A co-leadership structure should support the career goals of the co-leaders themselves, enable them to expand chosen capacities, and embrace new challenges (ibid.).

Flexibility also encourages a culture of experimentation as co-leaders are able to “try something… and be comfortable with accepting that it didn’t work” due to being adaptable, and able to change course if needed (Leiper O’Malley and Johnson, 2017).

Taking time to achieve alignment

Building "good chemistry" between co-leaders is directly linked to the amount of time they spend with one another "figuring out" how to work together (Yankee, 2017). One interviewee of a study (ibid.) emphasised the importance of taking time for regular communication as a practice, sharing, "We spent time together talking about… our individual visions and our collective vision. What do we want to accomplish? What did we want to be different? How do you want to work together? We even talked about how we would do conflict." Co-leadership "requires time to fully realise the benefits… inherent in the model" (ibid.).

For co-leaders working in virtual organisations, being able to spend time together in-person where possible cannot be replaced with an online meeting (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017). It takes time to get to know your co-leader, their "entry points to their work" and how they "see the world" (AWID, 2019). Spending time together is not only important for meetings and work-related activities, which is helpful, but spending time recreationally together, simply having fun, greatly contributes to achieving alignment between co-leaders (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017; and Schildkrout, 2014).

Working with external coaches and consultants

Working with consultants and coaches to support co-leaders in developing strategies for organisational processes, as well as to understand one another better, are helpful to guide co-leaders in organisational processes, and on how to work together.

Coaching enables each co-leader to "develop greater self-awareness through identifying style differences, behavioural tendencies under pressure, and assumptions that may detract from building mutual trust" (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). Previous co-director of FRIDA, Ruby Johnson, explained that having coaches by their side gave them strength to take risks, and also "made things a bit less scary and way more fun" (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017). She added that being able to reach out to executive directors from sister organisations to ask for advice had also been invaluable (ibid.).

Investing in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

Due to the tendency for feminist organisations with co-leadership models to also be organisations that encourage learning and experimentation, organisations "invested heavily" (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017) in MEL. UAF-AP have introduced an 'accountability' aspect to their ME(A)L system on a framework centred on 'emergent learning' (Real and Buadromo, 2019).

Criteria for co-leadership success of mainstream organisations are different to feminist organisations primarily due to the stark differences in values and purpose. Mainstream criteria given in the literature include points such as ‘buy-in’ of key stakeholders, stronger results in terms of a business’ net sales and profits, growth and expansion of the business, staff retention and decrease in stress of co-leaders (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). While no direct access to MEL analysis of feminist co-leadership organisations were found for the purposes of this review, UAF-AP’s framework centred on ‘emergent learning’ include criteria such as better adaptability, increased responsiveness to changes in context and increased learning across members of staff (Darling et al., 2016).

Expecting conflict and building practices to address it systematically

Getting to know one another as co-leaders when stepping into a new leadership position takes time (AWID, 2019). Each co-leadership is also incredibly unique, and therefore ways of working together are going to be unique too. While the systems and practices co-leaders put in place do not have to look like the systems and practices of others, it is important to develop a collective leadership style (Leiper O’Malley and Johnson, 2017).

Having processes in place for addressing conflict is often overlooked amidst the excitement of working together, but conflict is also a “common side effect of drawing out each person’s unique perspective” (Schildkrout, 2014), especially in organisations where risk-taking and experimentation is encouraged. Creating scheduled time to check in with one another (Leiper O’Malley and Johnson, 2017) and inviting an external facilitator to support conflict resolution (Schildkrout, 2014), were practices mentioned that strengthened resolution between co-leaders.

Ensuring the co-leadership model is adaptable to the organisation’s needs

While responsibilities and leadership roles may be shared across an organisation, accountability may not be. As such, it is important to put mechanisms in place to ensure that decision-making processes are adaptable to the organisation’s best interest. One scholar describes shared leadership as part of a spectrum, where one particular expression of leadership is appropriate for one situation, but not necessarily for another (Yankee, 2017). The decision to terminate the contract of a staff member, for example, may require a top-down approach, while the development of a new programme, for example, would benefit from participatory input and decision-making by members across the organisation’s community (ibid.).

Setting boundaries

Creating boundaries is an act of self- and collective care (Leiper O’Malley and Johnson, 2017) and is essential for the resilience of co-leaders’ wellbeing. This involves being clear about personal limits, and also being comfortable with saying, ‘no,’ or asking for help (ibid.).

Across the organisation more generally, co-director led Third Wave Fund have tried to implement policies that "anticipate our inability to set boundaries and does that for us," by implementing a four-day work week (that "isn't a five-day work week crammed into four days.") (Mic-Check! Podcast, 2019).

Boundary-setting also includes respecting the precious time co-leaders have to work intensely together without other distractions. In virtual working contexts, this entails blocking periods in one's calendar where calls cannot be taken, or taking a number of days on either side of a conference in which both will be present to work together in-person (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017).

Using online tools for working together virtually

For virtual organisations, using online project management and communication tools is essential (ibid.). Examples of such tools include Asana, Slack (AWID, 2019; and Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017), Smartsheet and Google Chat (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017).

Co-director of AWID, Hakima Abbas, also emphasises the need to simply have conversations. "You need to connect on things. Where in an office you might say, hey… what happened there?" (AWID, 2019), in virtual organisations, time needs to be scheduled to have those check ins (ibid.).

Working across time zones is also something that can be used to co-leaders' advantage (AWID, 2019; and Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017) in being able to connect to more people together across more daylight hours. Previous co-director of FRIDA, Ruby Johnson, also explained that spending more time in a closer time zone to Devi, her co-lead, was helpful, especially during intense periods of closer collaboration (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017).

Committing to one another

Success is not only a result of co-leaders' commitment to a common goal, but also of a visible commitment to one another (Newton, 2015). Having one another as a trusted point of support, enables each co-leader to operate at their best (Greenpeace, 2016; and Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017).

- **"Claim your spirit animal"**: What previous co-directors of FRIDA have described as claiming your spirit animal, Ruby Johnson shared their belief in the need to "reflect on your own challenges and strengths, and work out how to support the other person in theirs" (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017). When co-leaders do so, they are able to draw strength from the qualities of the other (ibid.), as well as from the co-leadership model itself, which offers "built-in peer mentoring" (ibid.).

- **Have honest conversations**: Related to this, effective co-leaders recognise that – of all people – they personally have one of the greatest impacts on their co-leader's experience of work. Honest conversations, while they may be uncomfortable sometimes, allow for vulnerability and hold spaces for strengthening the relationship (Newton, 2015).

- **Give space for one another to rest:** Furthermore, the culture of burnout is a reality that an overwhelming number of feminists working in organisations face. The previous co-leaders of FRIDA developed "a system of shifting intensity, where one person has some downtime while the other goes at full speed" (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017) as a way to help each other cope with stress.

- **Praise your co-leader for successes, and take responsibility for failures:** Lastly, people, both within and outside of the organisation, do not always know how to navigate interacting with co-leaders. As a result, it can be commonplace for people to "incorrectly assign" success or failure to one co-leader or the other. Regardless of one's direct involvement in the situation, allocating praise for successes to your co-leader and being the first to pick up responsibility for any failures strengthens trust and unity between co-leaders (Newton, 2015).

Committing to oneself

Feminist scholars and practitioners have not only spearheaded reflection and analysis around the politics of the personal and the notion of self-care, but have also led great resistances throughout history against the separation of work and family, and public and private life, as ideologies that reproduce patriarchy. However, feminists continue to hold terrible track records in abiding by our politics and taking responsibility for our own care in the midst of increased pressures fighting for the survival of our organisations and movements in increasingly hostile political and social environments (Batliwala, 2010).

At the same time, we are well aware that transforming the world starts with transforming ourselves. In an organisational context, for co-leaders, this means practising self-reflexivity around how they impact the wellbeing of the organisation and those with whom they work. It also means acknowledging the truly transformative effect leadership has the potential of having on individual co-leaders.

- **Practice self-awareness and recognise your weaknesses:** Leadership, no matter how distributed, is first practised by individuals, who bring to their leadership their histories, experiences and personalities (Batliwala and Friedman, 2014). When we feel threatened, stressed or anxious, deeply buried emotions and past experiences operating at a sub-conscious level may start to drive our actions and cause us to say or do things that contradict our feminist values (ibid.).

Needless to say, the way co-leaders handle stress has a huge impact on their relationship with their co-leader. In a 2010 study, self-awareness, "defined by the courage to face your own strengths and shortcomings" and open-mindedness were considered the most important attributes in evaluating a potential co-leader (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). Recognising one's own weaknesses enhances effective collaboration (Schildkrout, 2014). A co-leader that is unable to see her weaknesses becomes unhelpful (ibid.).

- **In moments of conflict, shift your perspective:** Conflict resolution often starts with the self. In the same study by Arnone and Stumpf (2010), co-leaders who scored as having the greatest success in their work based on certain criteria indicated that they were able to establish a positive working relationship with their co-leader, which many attributed to a simple shift in their own perspective. One co-leader interviewed explained, "At some point, I realised that I would have to keep my ego in check and serve the firm. I did not want to be a casualty of my competitive nature" (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010).

- **Identify internalised gender norms:** One point of reckoning that Gemma Graham, co-director of We Are Restless, had was around internalised gender norms. Despite working for a feminist organisation with "flexible organisation policies," the guilt she felt about being a new mother, hiring a nanny, and doing a full-time directorship role posed barriers to her work (We Are Restless, 2021).

- **Grow and thrive!** While effective co-leadership requires self-awareness and constant reflexivity, taking on leadership roles is also "extremely transformative for individuals, enabling deep-seated changes in the self that have resulted in… self-awareness, empowerment and liberation" (Batliwala, 2010). Co-leadership leads to "significant personal growth" and broadens co-leaders' perspectives on the practice of leadership (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). Gemma Graham of We Are Restless described the co-leadership model in particular as being "powerful" in restoring her own confidence in herself (We Are Restless, 2021).

While the practices articulated above are by no means comprehensive and are based on existing studies and reflections, they are tried and tested examples of what practices can look like when effectively informed by the politics, principles and feminist understandings of power that nurture the wellbeing and meaningfulness of an organisation.

7. Leadership transitions into a feminist co-leadership model

"...The transition was just another moment where we needed to do that – to be feminist. How we got there had to be consistent with what we wanted to achieve."

– LYDIA ALPÍZAR DURÁN, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN DEVELOPMENT

A final practice that integrates the politics, principles and feminist agenda to build collective power within organisations and outside of them is setting up the organisation for leadership transitions. Not only are leadership transitions a healthy opportunity for transformative change and a process that embodies the politics of a feminist organisation, knowing that you are leaving influences the very decisions and ways of working you will undertake as a leader. Interestingly, while online resources on feminist-co-leadership were scarce, nearly half of the resources available on feminist co-leadership were on leadership transition processes for establishing a co-leadership model.

7.1 Political relevance

Leadership transitions, first and foremost, resonate with feminist politics and principles. They are extensions of shared leadership in and of themselves, because they give organisations the opportunity to "remain led by the communities [they] serve" as new members of those communities take over (Reprojobs, 2020). This is especially relevant for youth-led organisations, such as Third Wave Fund and FRIDA, where transitions are necessary for those organisations to align with their principles. Transitions themselves are a "deliberate process of sharing and giving power away" (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

As co-chair of FRIDA, Sophia Pierre-Antoine, noted, "We know best what it means not to be given space" (2019). A leadership committed to collective power recognises a leadership transition as an “exciting and moving moment” (Pierre-Antoine, 2019), that indicates that the organisation is in alignment with its politics and values. It is an opportunity to widen and refine understandings of leadership and power, and to rethink what leadership can look like (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

Former executive director of Third Wave Fund, Rye Young, points out the “crisis” we currently do not identify as such, in leadership remaining unchanged in feminist organisations (Mic Check! Podcast, 2019). New leaders bringing in new ideas “to re-enliven feminist work” is consistent with “the politics of change” that requires organisations to be responsive to changing environments and open to “shifts and rejuvenation” (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

7.2 Best practices for successful transitions and feminist co-leadership

Below are some practices and experiences shared from feminist organisations AWID, FRIDA and Third Wave Fund, who have, in different ways, documented transition processes into new co-leadership. These practices are also accompanied lightly by best practices laid out in the literature on co-leadership.

New leaders already enter with an ‘end-game’ or exit strategy in mind
A successful transition to feminist co-leadership requires an explicit and full commitment by senior leadership, including the board and executive director/s themselves, to changing current leadership (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019; and Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). Ideally, this commitment occurs from the moment new leadership step into the role (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010; and Reprojobs, 2020).

Rye Young, previous executive director of Third Wave Fund, shares their perspective (ibid.):

> “To see through this vision of a sustainable organisation led by young women, queer, and trans people of color, I had to plan for my departure as a core aspect of my job from the very start. I thought about my leadership transition in the way I hired staff, the way I fundraised, the way I set up our finances and operating structure, and the way I helped grow the board so that they could eventually lead a search process and support someone new.”

For co-leaders, sharing their thoughts on and planning their exit-strategy is a critical discussion to have together at the beginning of the working relationship (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). A second important discussion is with staff, board and donors, so that they understand from the beginning how the organisation's leaders intend to transition out (Reprojobs, 2020).

Time is given to the process and timing is made intentional

While the benefits of co-leadership are endless, cultivating shared leadership between two people takes a significant amount of time, and will most likely reduce the efficiency of the organisation's programmes in the short term (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). That is okay, and it is necessary, since giving it time is part of the political work (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

Aside from giving time to the process, timing is important too. The boards of organisations expressed gratitude to directors who gave them a lot of lead time. Previous executive director of AWID, Lydia Alpízar, gave the board, directors team and staff a little over two years' notice, which enabled them to start a reflection process on how to approach the transition (ibid.). Rye Young, previous executive director of Third Wave Fund, informed the board and staff of their intention to leave in five to ten years, from the moment of their appointment. For them, the time to leave had less to do with a particular date as much as it had to do with getting the organisation through particular developmental stages and being able to hand over a fiscally sustainable organisation to new leadership. "How long does it take to cook? Until it's done." (Mic Check! Podcast, 2019).

At AWID, Lydia Alpízar also coincided her departure with the end of a strategic plan, which enabled the new co-directors to facilitate a process themselves of setting a new vision and trajectory for the organisation (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

Staff are included in the process and given space to engage

Part of the responsibility of co-leaders when transitioning out is to actively work with other staff in grappling with and deciding on how internal systems can be made to work better (Allison et al. 2018), so that staff that stay behind are left with systems in place that work better for them.

Secondly, both FRIDA and AWID set up a leadership transition team or committee, made up of staff, board members and consultants, to support the process of selecting "two new kindred and compatible souls" (Pierre-Antoine, 2019) to become their organisations' next co-executive directors (Pierre-Antoine, 2019; and Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

AWID also ensured that staff were involved in all stages of the recruitment process. At one point, AWID set up a Town Hall for staff to give their input and ask questions about the role and functions of the new co-directors (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019; and AWID, 2019). As a result, "staff felt engaged, consulted and informed, and there were no big surprises for them. This ensured the process flowed internally and there was trust in the ED and the Board" (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

The transition is conducted with a clear 'ethics of care' for the people directly affected by the power shifts

Changes and shifts in power can incite fear in different ways for all involved (Batliwala and Friedman, 2014). Relationships and interactions need to be navigated from a practice of care, whether it be with the outgoing and incoming directors, the donors, the staff, the board, or the wider community and movements in which the organisation sits.

For the transition process at AWID, "space for caring and to be really affirming with each other" was created between the outgoing director and incoming co-directors through regular check-ins (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2018). At the same time, partners and donors were also assured that the transition was a healthy process. They reassured donors that "the transition did not emerge from a crisis, there was not a coup – it was one more step in the growth of AWID" (ibid.).

For the outgoing director of Third Wave Fund, Rye Young, the transition was an opportunity to affirm and celebrate the amazing staff behind the fund's work when informing donors about the change in leadership (Mic Check! Podcast, 2019). They talked about transitions "as being healthy and as an important skill for movements to have" (Reprojobs, 2020). They also integrated their perspective of transitions as normal and healthy into their management style, by encouraging staff themselves to think about their careers beyond the organisation, and dream their next steps (ibid.).

7.3 Reflections on recruitment

Executive directors shared their reflections on how to choose candidates for a feminist co-leadership role. In most cases, co-directors started their co-leadership role already knowing their co-leader. Secondly, leadership styles and politics of candidates are critical to consider.

Knowing one another beforehand

The number of feminist co-leaders that knew one another before being appointed far outweighs those who did not. This is the case for AWID, FRIDA, Third Wave Fund, We Are Restless and EDGE Funders Alliance at least. For Cindy Clark, co-director of AWID, "It's important to know someone. I don't know how it would have worked for me with someone I didn't know" (AWID, 2019).

While meeting one another for the first time once appointed is not uncommon, one co-leader in a 2010 study suggested that it was, at the very least, incredibly important that co-executive director candidates discuss their philosophy and differences in perspectives in advance, before accepting the position (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010). Having a coach or facilitator to guide those conversations was also considered useful (ibid.).

One interesting case was the recruitment of Cindy Clark and Hakima Abbas as co-executive directors of AWID. Unlike other examples of recruitment processes, Cindy and Hakima sent in a joint application for the co-directorship roles (AWID, 2019).

Complementary skills and politics

One of the priorities that the recruitment team have when looking for ideal candidates is the extent to which they can complement one another's skill sets and leadership styles. For organisations such as FRIDA, AWID and UAF-AP, this worked particularly well. Cindy Clark explained that "what works well between Hakima and I is that we are different and complement each other, but also have certain points in common."

Over and above this, both the co-directors of FRIDA and AWID expressed gratitude to have institutional resources that enabled them to get leadership coaching (AWID, 2019) and personality assessments (Leiper O'Malley and Johnson, 2017) that gave them tools and language to improve their work together.

One thing that Third Wave Fund tried to remain of aware of during the recruitment process is not falling into "the traps of individualism," by making a conscious decision not to be drawn to a candidate just because they embody charisma. A concern that Rye Young, the outgoing director, had when putting out the job announcement was that the people the organisation needs to lead it are the very people "who are going to tell themselves they should not do it" (Mic Check! Podcast, 2019). Devi Leiper O'Malley, previous director of FRIDA, shared her own sentiments of imposter syndrome when the call for a director for FRIDA was released. The co-leadership model is what made her feel comfortable enough to apply. "Philanthropy especially needs those folks who think, they won't want me, I can't do this," said Rye Young (Mic Check! Podcast, 2019).

7.4 Setting up future co-leaders for success

For feminist organisations AWID and Third Wave Fund, it was critical to ensure that the organisations that the new co-directors would step into were strong, healthy and ready to receive them.

For the outgoing director of Third Wave Fund, Rye Young, this was political: “An important aspect of preparing for any leadership transition, but particularly one where a white leader is passing on leadership to people of colour, is fundraising. I spoke with donors about the importance of giving multi-year contributions, but made it a priority in the lead up to my transition” (Reprojobs, 2020). One of their key tasks coming on board as executive director years before then was to get the Fund to a point of financial sustainability. Due to the “chaos fiscally” that Third Wave Fund had gone through, they built reserves in the Funds bank account and set up a fundraising strategy to receive long-term funding.

AWID found themselves similarly preparing the organisation for their new co-executive directors. There were three missing director-level positions on the senior leadership team that had to be filled. AWID ensured they were hired by the end of 2016, so that by the time the co-executive directors started in January 2017, they could facilitate the onboarding for those positions (Alpízar Durán and Williams, 2019).

Essentially, leadership transitions are in and of themselves acts of shared ledership, and align with the same political agenda that drives organisations to adopt co-leadership models. While documentation of such practices is still new, the reflections shared by outgoing and incoming executive directors on their experiences of the process are helpful groundwork for understanding best practices.

8. Conclusion

“Of course, it has its challenges, but working so closely with someone, and having equal decision-making opportunity, has been one of the most beautiful experiences of my professional and personal journey yet.”

– RUBY JOHNSON, FORMER CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FRIDA THE YOUNG FEMINIST FUND

“Dragon and dolphin together, I think we make an amazing beast!”

– DEVI LEIPER O’MALLEY, FORMER CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FRIDA THE YOUNG FEMINIST FUND

This desk review sought to provide an overview of current literature and other online resources available on feminist co-leadership. While feminist co-leadership is still considered to be an emerging construct by practitioners, the review drew from different pools of thought to understand how co-leadership is being understood and can be practiced effectively for feminist work. These spheres of perspective included management and organisational development platforms on co-leadership and shared leadership, scholar-activist writings on feminist leadership, and reflections by feminist leadership practitioners on feminist co-leadership and feminist leadership transitions.

While we draw from resources available online, it is important to be reminded that the concept of shared leadership is not new, but has been a longstanding practice employed by communities and movements across the world for a very long time. As such, we must acknowledge that our documentation of the feminist co-leadership we practice in our organisations is an opportunity to acknowledge and build on existing wisdom.

Mainstream conceptualisations of co-leadership tend not to look beyond the organisation itself for its relevance. Feminist leadership is explicitly engaged with the distribution of power, building collective power, and ensuring that the practices within our organisations reflect the feminist values that inform our work outside of it. Shared leadership is an embodiment of this agenda.

In order to critically assess what makes co-leadership relevant and effective as a feminist leadership model, we applied Srilatha Batliwala's 'feminist leadership diamond' framework to the reflections shared by leaders and co-leaders on effective practices for feminist co-leadership. This led us through the leadership components of power, principles and values, politics and purpose and practice. We ascertained that successful practices of co-leadership are those that are effectively embedded in the power agenda, principles and politics of the organisations in which they are employed.

Lastly, we delved deeper into leadership transitions as a practice that strengthens and upholds the politics, principles and commitment to collective power of organisations. Leadership transitions are in and of themselves acts of shared leadership.

One of the many reasons more resources need to be created on feminist co-leadership is to demonstrate the radical transformative power of shared leadership on the communities we serve, the organisations we nurture and on feminist leaders themselves. The ancient wisdoms from which we borrow perhaps hold the secrets for unlocking the future we strive for, shaped by generative learning and collective power.

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10. Appendix

A list of feminist and women-led organisations that have adopted a co-leadership model:

10.1 Feminist organisations

- Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
- FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund
- Raising Voices
- Third Wave Fund
- Urgent Action Fund Asia Pacific

10.2 Women-led organisations

- Association for Progressive Communications
- EDGE Funders Alliance
- Greenpeace
- Hive Fund
- We Are Restless