

reflections

MOSAICS & MIRRORS
FEMINIST CO-LEADERSHIP



Perspectives & learnings on co-leadership

in the mosaic

Acknowledgements

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In admiration of all the co-leads charting new paths and showing up for each other and their communities every day

In gratitude to all the people who have supported us in our co-leadership. You challenged us, helped us grow, and believed in who we were together.

Ruby & Devi - co-leads once, co-conspirators forever.

www.feministcoleadership.com

This paper is Part 1 of our larger research project, Mosaics & Mirrors: Insights and practices of feminist co-leadership. In this section, we reflect on the key elements of the mosaic that is co-leadership. For a summary of highlights or the full report, please see the website: feministcoleadership.com

Introduction

Introduction

With the unpredictability that the last few years have brought – two years+ of a pandemic amidst ongoing political, economic and environmental crises – we are seeing drastic shifts in how organisations function in the day to day. Some are moving to hybrid or fully virtual work spaces, or extending additional leave or flexibility to their teams, and many are taking up models of co-leadership.

We believe this is a sign of our times, sometimes linked to necessity and pragmatism to support the sustainability and resilience of the work, while for others it is clearly aligned to their broader vision for sharing power and transformation. It is timely for a deep and broad look on what co-leadership is as a leadership structure, practice, and impact.



Who are we and why are we writing this report?

We are [Devi Leiper O'Malley](#) and [Ruby Johnson](#), two feminist activists that came together as the first co-leaders of FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund for seven years from 2013-2019. We followed in the foundational footsteps of the founding coordinator Amina Doherty. When we came together, we were mostly strangers with a few mutual connections.

Ruby is Australian, but lived and worked in Cambodia for several years, where Devi is from. Ruby met Devi's mother first, who encouraged us to meet. Over the course of two years we met a handful of times to share a fabulous Vietnamese lunch, some drinks, and one time to do some shopping at a pop-up vintage store. Ruby was hired first as a FRIDA co-lead, and then Devi joined a few months later.

When we became co-leads in 2013, co-leadership in the philanthropic and women's rights spaces was fairly uncommon. We had a lot to prove, not only as young executive directors but as co-leaders and feminist co-leaders.

From the onset, our leadership was part of a larger political project to transform conventional and mainstream practices and assumptions of leadership. After being founded with one young feminist coordinator, Amina, the founding FRIDA Advisory Council decided to adopt a co-leadership structure for several reasons: "innovation, a new approach that questioned existing structures and patterns of conventional leadership, acknowledgement of the range of skills and complex attributes required for a leadership role, especially for a quickly growing initiative emerging out of start-up."¹

During our time at FRIDA, we played a critical role in strengthening the Fund, from being the only staff members to growing to a global team of 20 young feminists around the world in a virtual office, expanding the budget from 250,000 USD to over 4 million USD and building a grantee community of 150 young feminist groups.

There is no doubt that we could have done some things better and the time is full of learning, but we really gave it all we had. It was hard work. As we continue to work together and are close friends, people often assume we were best of friends the

whole way through. In reality, when we began working together, we were unaware of each other's personalities, habits, fears and ambitions. Over the years, there were several low moments, when we weren't sure we'd make it as co-leads or as friends, when we disappointed each other, made mistakes, or were too burnt out. But in these lows, you can find some of our biggest highs because they demonstrated our enduring commitment to our shared values such as trust, respect and boundaries, but also vulnerability, empathy and closeness.

Upholding these values together can yield concrete pathways to rethink, renegotiate and redistribute power, and enable transformations within movements, organisations, and culture. This has meant a commitment to unpacking varying privileges we hold and interrogating our own power and space for learning. Without a clear intention and authentic commitment from the individuals in the co-lead structure as well the *whole* organisation, co-leadership is not going to be much different from conventional leadership structure – except we suspect that it may be more prone to failure.

There are conflicting and competing outlooks on co-leadership – some believe it is the way to do feminist leadership, others think that it leads to conflict and rarely succeeds. A lot of this tension is clouded by the mystery of what co-leadership actually is and the lack of information available.

This goes to the heart of why we are writing this report. We want to share what we learned, read, and heard from others on what it takes to *practice* feminist co-leadership mainly for other co-leads, but also for the entire organisation around them, namely the board and staff.



1. This comes from the public newsletter announcing FRIDA's transition to co-leadership in 2013.

Methodology

and approach

Methodology *and approach*

Sparked from personal stories and experiences, this work is a mixed-media piece, with multiple methods and contributors coming together to present this body of knowledge. We are grateful for these collaborations and for the love and time that has been put into this report. The methodology consists of the following:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Christy Selica Alves authored a [Literature Review](#) that included academic journals, blog sites and organisation websites.² Much of this literature review has been directly woven throughout this report. Searches for academic literature took place using academic search engines and digital commons such as university publication lists. While a substantive amount of writing on shared leadership is situated in education and health, for the purposes of this review, articles on business management and organisational development were prioritised. Unfortunately, though perhaps unsurprisingly, the 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.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS DOCUMENTING OUR EXPERIENCE

We were interviewed by Naomi Saelens in order to document our experiences of co-leadership during our seven years at FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund, and to identify key themes and practices. These interviews totalled over 10 hours and enabled the distillation of knowledge and reflections of praxis.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Between September 2020 - March 2022, we conducted interviews with practitioners who worked with co-leads and co-leads coming primarily from feminist movements. These were a mix of funders and feminist organisations, with one exception from the private sector. Interviews focused on hearing how co-leadership structures were created, any practices the co-leads had developed, and their reflections on the advantages and disadvantages of the co-leadership structure. Change is constant - over the course of the project, some of these situations of the co-leads have evolved and may not exist in the same formation. We have done our best to integrate learnings including when things did not work out.

² In addition, Lauren A. Lanzo's recent dissertation published in January 2022 offers an even more substantive literature review of academic articles and experiments that discuss the pros and cons of shared leadership in multiple sectors and levels. See bibliography for full reference.

Interviews

Co-leads:

Ana Conner & Kiyomi Fujikawa,
THIRD WAVE FOUNDATION

Maggie Collier & Kirsty Fuller,
FLAMINGO GROUP

Alex Kent and Kate Muhwezi,
RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT

Lydia Alpizar,
MESO AMERICA WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS INITIATIVE

Hakima Abbas & Cindy Clark,
ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN DEVELOPMENT

Virisila Buadromo & Vinita Sahasranaman,
URGENT ACTION FUND ASIA AND PACIFIC

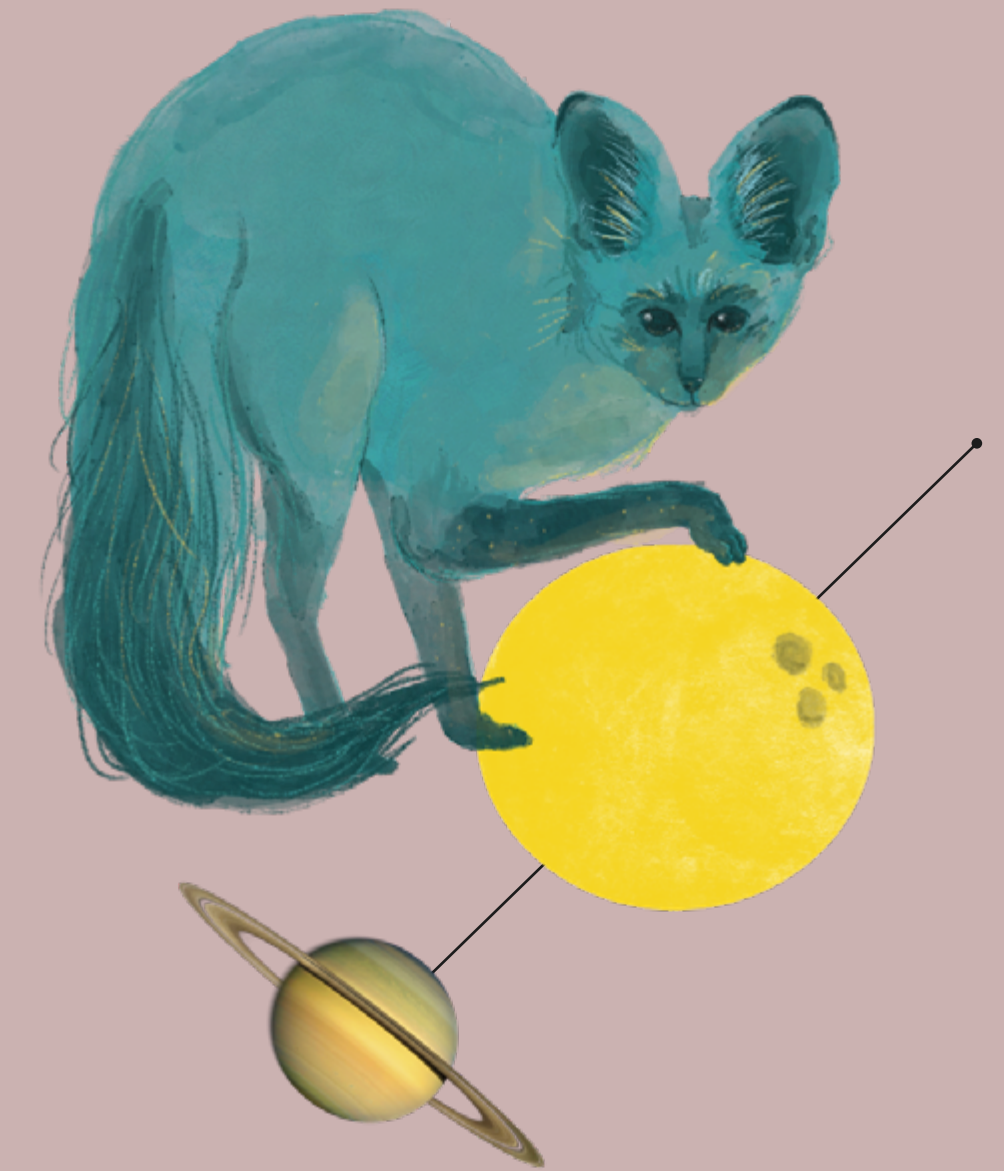
Huda Jawad & Zharin Zhafrael Mohamed,
MUSAWAH

Namita Aavriti Malhotra, Katerina Fialova and Jan Moolman
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Jess Tomlin & Jess Houssian,
EQUALITY FUND

Anonymous co-leads

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Individual practitioners:

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MAMA CASH

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Anonymous contributors from organisations transitioning to co-leadership, considering it, or deciding against it

Mukami Marete,
UHAI

Reflections

on co-leadership *in the mosaic*

Reflections in the mosaic

Our findings show that the conventional perspective that an individual leader can possess all the skills required to manage increasingly complex and adaptive organisations, is outdated.

For feminist organisations, co-leadership resonates with their values around sharing power, creating change from within, and also with our ethics around creating a thriving, healthy workplace for all staff members.

However, some believe that co-leadership is more trouble than it's worth. While sounding ideal in theory, in practice, it can be seen as too risky and prone to conflict. This section of the report looks at the overall positive and negative impacts of the co-leadership model, drawing on literature and interviews conducted for this report. Some think that while promising, it is not the panacea to the challenges we face in our organisations.

What is co-leadership?

In the simplest definition, co-leadership can be defined as two or more people equally sharing power, influence, and responsibility in an organisation, company, collective, or project, rather than a single leader. The concept of co-leadership was first documented in literature by leadership scholars David Heenan and Warren Bennis, who co-authored a book titled, *Co-Leaders: The Power of Great Partnerships* (1999). One of the aims of the book was to discredit the appraisal of the single heroic leader, as well as acknowledge the strong contributions a second leader brings to leadership practice.

It is important to acknowledge that shared leadership is not a new concept. Collective leadership has been a part of social movements for a long time and continues to be practised in different communities and cultures around the world. It is critical to understand that as we attempt to theorise around shared and co-leadership, "we are borrowing" from past knowledge 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.

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). Over time, the understanding of what makes good leadership has shifted and expanded, and within this expansion, notions of co-leadership and shared leadership have surfaced.

So what is *feminist* co-leadership?

Women, in particular, have been organising through horizontal leadership structures and non-hierarchical collectives and networks for centuries, often rejecting the concept of 'leadership' entirely, as an embodiment of patriarchy and the monopolisation of power. Commissioned by CREA and written by Srilatha Batliwala, *Feminist Leadership for social transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud*, was a seminal piece of work attempting to define and articulate what *feminist leadership* is and does, and "nail the jelly to the wall" so that we may be able to actually assess its worth and impact. In her review of different definitions of feminist leadership from movement figures at multiple levels and locations, Batliwala concludes that all the definitions of feminist leadership have several important features:

- ✱ They describe a set of attributes/behaviours, values, and practices
- ✱ They deal with power and politics
- ✱ They hint at feminists' own use and practice of power when they occupy leadership positions

We offer the following simple definition of feminist co-leadership based on Batliwala's work:

A DEFINITION OF FEMINIST CO-LEADERSHIP

Feminist co-leadership is a structure of two or more identified leaders that is based on a feminist perspective and vision for social justice. Individually and collectively, these leaders are transforming themselves and their organisations or collectives, to use their power, resources and skills, in non-oppressive, inclusive practices and processes to mobilise others around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic, and political transformation. Feminist co-leaders take shared accountability for living up to these values, and working together to divide responsibilities and tasks to deliver on a group's shared goals.

Decision-making

Decision-making is an essential element of leadership and behaviour within an organisation. It is an inherent site of power negotiation and practice based on the type of decision-making, from routine to strategic, policy and operational, and individual and group decisions.



The co-leadership structure offers many different opportunities for robust decision-making. However, there are mixed opinions on how this supports overall organisational effectiveness.

Firstly, co-leadership offers "cognitive heterogeneity" (Yankee, 2017), bringing a greater diversity of ideas to the table.

“ ————— CINDY, AWID

So many of us have this really ingrained notion that the leader brings the answers to problems whether we like that or not. And then having co-leads helps to disrupt that because what do you do when they have two different answers? So getting to work with a co-lead, I realise there are different solutions and there is no 'one way forward'. In our experience, Hakima and I are often changing, rethinking, or shifting each other's decisions, and when it works, it's great. I realise I'm learning and that's how I want it to be.



The relationship that co-leaders have nurtures a safe sounding board, offering space for constructive disagreement or refinement of ideas that leads to great decisions. So if done well, having more than one leader can increase the overall intellectual capacity of the leadership.

Secondly, successful co-leaders that work well together provide each other with more confidence, energy and inspiration. Especially when considering strategic vision and risk-taking, co-leadership offers the opportunity for bold moves due to the additional dialogue, analysis and support two leaders bring to the process.

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ROSA, PURPOSEFUL

I think having someone else by your side makes you braver. We have done some bold, risky things... Just having someone saying, 'Yes, we can do this' and being by your side...we have taken a lot of decisions I know I wouldn't have on my own. I am also absolutely certain that we have made better decisions because we've made them together. The process of back and forth is really a process of nuancing, refining, stress testing and sharpening.

Thirdly, co-leadership can enhance effectiveness in decision-making. Many supporters of the co-leadership model raise this as one of its major benefits, especially against the backdrop of the complexity and extent of demands placed on leadership. Managing these demands by sharing them with a partner just makes more sense. 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."

However, some would question whether co-leadership can slow down decision-making, and therefore limit an organisation's effectiveness.

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HAKIMA, AWID

While decision-making might take a bit longer, if the final decision is actually effective, then the length of the process might have been worth it, even if perhaps it is not as timely as people would sometimes want it to be in the moment.

Many feminist leaders would question the **dominant narratives** of leadership that define efficiency only based on speed, and prioritize it at all costs. Zohra Moosa reminds us that there is "political work in reminding ourselves that the quality of our decisions matters, not just the speed at which they are generated." Zohra also added that "just because something is slower doesn't necessarily mean it's better. It is also true that sometimes we take too long to make decisions in our feminist organisations – and it's not because the quality of the decisions are improved as a result, nor that we are necessarily cultivating relationships, or any of it. We sometimes think more process is important because we elevate the role of process in our movements..." We think this point is important to continue to unpack in conversations on leadership all together.

Cultivating shared leadership between two people takes a significant amount of time, and may reduce the 'speed' of the organisation's programmes in the short term (Arnone and Stumpf, 2010) – but may lead to the strongest investment into enhancing effectiveness. **Giving time for relationship cultivation is necessary, and it is part of our political work in feminist leadership** (Alpizar Durán and Williams, 2019).

There can also be miscommunication and confusion regarding decision-making processes. A staff member having an Informal conversation with one co-lead, can be mistaken as a decision, which the other co-lead is not aware of. Challenges also arise when the separation of roles or distribution of areas of work or the decision-making process is unclear. This can look like co-leads doing everything together without clarity on when decisions are jointly led or held by one co-lead. This can cause a strain on resources and at times neither co-lead holding the work fully, or overall lack of clarity who is leading specific pieces, leading to confusion, tension, and lack of responsibility and accountability of key elements of the executive function. This lack of clarity and unclear distribution of work often ultimately leads to conflict.

Co-leadership offers checks and balances through collaborative decision-making and bringing sometimes conflicting perspectives into alignment with one another. 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. Disagreements turn into a helpful process.

“ ————— **CHERNOR, PURPOSEFUL**

You can disagree without being disagreeable. It always comes from a place that if she [my co-lead, Rosa] will disagree with the idea, she will not disagree with me. We can have a fierce, really heated debate. But if you are listening, you will see that it's a debate and we will go with a resolution, even if we need to say, 'I will go with this decision for now, but these are my reservations'.

While disagreement in co-lead relationships is inevitable, how different co-leads manage their disagreement processes varies. Some are happy to openly discuss them in front of their teams, whereas others prefer to debate alone first and present a unified front to their teams. For some, publicly disagreeing with respect and care, normalises a culture of discussion and debate in more collective spaces.

“ ————— **CINDY, AWID**

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.

For this to function well it is important that staff are confident in the co-leads' broader aligned vision and unity. In some contexts public disagreement or conflict and a lack of 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. However in these cases they may be linked to other dynamics at play within the organisation.

Well being (*or not*) of co-leaders

Experiential reflections from our research suggest that co-leads tend to prioritise individual, collective care and wellbeing as part of their shared leadership practice. However, we must be careful not to romanticise co-leadership as the way to solve all challenges related to overworking and burn out:



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DEVI

I went through a significant burn-out crisis that seemed to come out of nowhere. I felt paralysed by fear and I came close to quitting. It was incredibly hard to talk to Ruby about this, because I knew everything would fall on her and it was hard to explain what I was going through when I didn't really understand it myself. However, she gave me a lot of space to take a break and seek help from others who helped me crawl out of the mental hole I had dug for myself.

Leading an organisation comes with great responsibility and personal cost. One of the key benefits of co-leadership cited in all of our interviews and in our own experience is the embedded support structure it can offer.

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JESS T., EQUALITY FUND

"I'm used to leadership being a lonely experience. But I feel I can do this work - stay in it - because I have a partner and support system. Someone who is sharing in the lift of a heavy load."

Co-leaders are able to support one another in attending to responsibilities, but also celebrate together when making accomplishments.

Kirsty Fuller of the Flamingo Group believes co-leadership models help prevent costly impacts of a stressed singular leader that can go ‘unchecked’:

“ ————— KIRSTY, FLAMINGO GROUP

I think you do get mavericks or very stressed CEOs. They end up, as we all do under stress, starting to make poor decisions. And they can also project their stress onto those around. They project their frustration and failures onto those around them. Whereas I think co-CEOs can sort of call each other to account... [Without a co-leader] I think it's actually less enjoyable, less fun. And actually I think it's less healthy. I think there is something about doing things together and supporting each other in different times, but also being held accountable by each other.

A co-leadership model can enable "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.

It is particularly important for a leader to be able to speak to another peer, since it is harder to speak to others in the organisation that they are otherwise responsible for or have power over. 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 (Yankee, 2017). We found in particular that "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).

“ ————— KIYOMI, THIRD WAVE

One thing that I just want to lift up on the co-director model or a co-co model is... there's so much isolation in leadership and some of that comes with power and some of that comes with how power changes relationships. Where folks can't be as honest with you. You can't share everything because some things need to be confidential. On top of that, there is isolation that just comes with leadership. And I feel like our co-director model has been so essential to breaking that isolation, preventing burnout, and just having someone else to bounce ideas off of without people being like, "Does that idea that you just shared out of the top of your mind mean my entire job is going to change next year?"

Lastly, the majority of existing literature examining co-leadership comes from corporate organisations, and a frequently reported pitfall of co-leaders' in these studies is competition between one another. Competition tended to impact 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.

But before the challenge of competitiveness is written 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 transformative practice of shared leadership within a capitalist context that still praises the heroic leader requires much unlearning.

As one co-lead reflected, this is often at the root of conflict when co-leads divide roles as external/internal because we then recognise the 'externally focused' co-lead as doing 'better' or 'doing more'. However "competitiveness isn't a default between people, that's what capitalism teaches us." (Rosa)

Very common feelings of self-doubt and individual ambition can arise in co-leaders of feminist organisations – they are still human, with weaknesses and emotions. These feelings may be more pronounced or likely to arise when you are working with a 'counterpart' that you are being compared to, and lead to 'competitive moments' between two people. In our experience, you have to get very comfortable being mistaken for the other co-lead, discussing which of you should get to take on a travel or training opportunity (when you both want it and can't afford to send both), or observing the different relationships staff or outsiders may have with each of you. Eventually we got used to the nature of this, and ultimately we understood our own selves a lot better.

Successful co-leaders are able to manage feelings of competition in a constructive way, and learn to work together to overcome or tend to each other's needs by sharing emotions and vulnerabilities.

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————— RUBY AND DEVI
(JOHNSON AND O'MALLEY, 2021)

As feminists, we used these experiences of vulnerability to recognise the flows of power within our relationship – when one of us was stronger at a certain skill than the other, and sharing how that made us feel intimidated, or when only one of us was invited to a conference and the other confessed their jealousy.

Impact of co-leadership on the staff and organisation

The presence of a co-leadership model at the executive level can have a ripple effect across the organisation. This impact can work to further decentralise power dynamics, support collective leadership to emerge at various levels, and deepen values and practice alignment.

However in some cases – in organisations, limited flow of information and poor communication – it can consolidate power at the top, and/or disenfranchise middle or senior leadership.

Co-leadership models can support healthy work environments that are aligned with collaborative cultures, and democratic principles of inclusiveness, participation and empowerment (Allison et al. 2018). Maggie of the Flamingo Group reflects on the impact on her company:

““ ——— MAGGIE, FLAMINGO GROUP

If you are asking a company to work in a collaborative way it sets a great example if the leadership is also collaborative. And maybe that's something that many businesses don't think through when you've got one person at the top lecturing people on collaborative working. It's more valuable to demonstrate that [collaboration] is happening at the most senior level in the business as well.

““ ——— MUKAMI, UHAI

I think of shared leadership beyond the Co-ED, and co-board chairs, for me it is important that co-leadership happens throughout the institution. It is important to reimagine what leadership looks like, not just leadership at the top. This means seeing the co-ED ships as a journey – towards dismantling hierarchies, a journey more than a destination. It is common to romanticise co-leadership – it's critical to see that beyond the top of an organisation, but also co-leadership trickles down and explores beyond that place of power at the top.

Co-leaders can have a positive effect on each other in their leadership style. Shildkrout (2014) explains how, in his experience as a co-leader, "[both of us] 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. Along this line, Rosa Bransky of Purposeful says:

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ROSA, PURPOSEFUL

We try to discuss our emotions and feelings quite often in our organisation as leaders, as it humanises us and it makes the people we work with feel safe to do that too. As we have got bigger, it has naturally got harder to know what's going on with everyone, all of the time. Who is struggling, who needs lifting up, who needs support. Having two of us with a watchful eye on our people is so invaluable. It means there is always someone observing, engaging with empathy, even while the other might be up against a deadline or struggling in their own ways.

Structures of organisations change as they think about how to expand the concept of shared leadership to the board and other parts of the organisation. A number of co-leads interviewed in this research shared that their co-leadership models had resulted in shared leadership in different parts of their organisation, including senior, middle and at board levels. It encourages behaviour shifts in leaders as well as in staff in how they engage with hierarchy and leadership. Vinita from UAF Asia and Pacific reflects how staff have evolved in their adoption of co-leadership:

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VINITA, UAF ASIA & PACIFIC

After a year of my co-leadership with Virisila, there's been like some sort of switch that got turned on or some shift that happened. Now we're starting to see a lot more co-leadership of people working together in pairs or more towards specific projects. Now we have two people leading an area of work and we have encouraged them to also set out an intention of working together, and being clear how they compliment each other and how they understand their individual and collective accountability.

Based on this experience, Virisila and Vinita of UAF Asia and Pacific advised that there should be intentional space for staff to reflect and engage with co-leadership as a political concept and vision, and that this will not only help the co-leads but the entire organisation.

However, while a feminist co-leadership model is usually welcomed by team members, it can often be challenging to manage staff expectations when co-leadership is seen as 'the solution' to overcome critical challenges. Because co-leadership can be part of a progressive political project of 'doing things differently', we have found that some people may naively expect all decisions to be made in a vacuum. However, any leader(s) has to make tough choices when there are limited resources, legal responsibilities, and urgent deadlines. We still live in a capitalist system that constrains feminist leaders to always be able to make the most 'feminist' decisions. Operating in fiscal and legal environments that are not designed for feminist or social justice organisations is challenging. Co-leads that are seen to be examples of 'progressive politics' are especially held to a high expectation, and often given very little room to make mistakes.

Additionally, several co-leaders shared that there can still be resistance from team members to the co-leadership structure. While some might not want to admit it, some staff may not be suited to a co-leadership structure if they are also not ready to be patient and open to ways of decision-making that require regular consultation between two co-leads. For example, finance or operations staff might get frustrated at the time it takes for two co-leads to sign off on a hire or significant payment. It takes time to organise and categorise the different kinds of major and minor decisions that require one or two sign-offs from co-leads. Similarly, it may take time to organise the co-leads' division of responsibilities, and consequently the lines of supervision. For staff who equally interact with both co-leads or sit in shared areas of responsibility, there may be frustration about who their direct supervisor is, and it is important to make this clear.

Furthermore, while some staff may be theoretically in support of co-leadership at the executive, they may not have signed up authentically to put the principle in practice in their own roles and behaviour at the organisation. They are not necessarily held accountable to the principle of dismantling hierarchical behaviours and systems

like the co-leads are. As a transformational project that demands new ways of working and behaviours at work, staff also have accountability in ensuring the co-leaders as individuals and a structure are also cared for. Enshrining this accountability when different power levels are still at play is complex, and we are still actively looking for ways to understand and practice this.

Lastly, having more than one leader may not lead to the co-leads having more time for their teams, particularly if the organisation has been growing. As co-leads talk most regularly to each other, they may fall into a decision-making and/or consultation rhythm that can exclude others.

“ ” ————— JESS T., EQUALITY FUND

Somebody warned us about this in the beginning. Problem solving happens quickly and easily in the partnership, and you risk not bringing in your team in the same way to solve as a collective. I don't think we've figured this out, but we are working on it and aware of it.

In particular in some examples, especially when the model has gone from one to two co-leads, the creation of co-leadership can make the mid-level leadership team feel shut out of key decisions or isolated. The co-leadership can be seen to consolidate power 'at the top'. Creating space for conversations about people's relationships to power and how power manifests in the organisation through decision-making will be supportive if such dynamics should emerge. Whether it is the co-leadership level or senior management level, some organisations have shared that more leadership structures have led to 'islands' of people that can become disconnected.

“ ” ————— ZOHRA, MAMA CASH

Having a conversation about power and our relationships to it doesn't go far enough. I would argue that this is a known potential pitfall and a reflective praxis is therefore also needed. There are ways of building the accountability of co-leads to other parts of the organisation, and not just to each other, which can be explored.

Financial implications of co-leadership

An area that co-leadership studies are currently lacking in is a comparative cost-benefit analysis of the singular versus co-leadership model.

A common argument against co-leadership is that it is too expensive. Many of the co-leads we interviewed believed that the overall impact and gains of co-leadership outweighed the financial cost of the multiple salaries.

“ ——— KIRSTY, FLAMINGO GROUP

There's no way [the new company] would have joint CEOs. And part of that would be the cost of two CEO salaries to do what they see as one job, which they see as a very expensive model for the business. But actually you will be doing different things together. Also if [the co-leadership] is more successful and retains more people etc, then it pays for itself. But I think if you talk to most big corporations, most and all the whole finance world, all the private equity and venture capitalist houses, anybody providing funding to businesses... I think they're highly sceptical of the co-leadership because they do that sort of masculine finger pointing thing, 'like who's accountable?' And it's a 'who' singular. It's not 'who' plural.

“ ——— ROSA, PURPOSEFUL

In some ways the question of cost is a frustrating one, because it feels so reductive. But in other ways of course understandable, given how resource constrained the work is. I'm sure that if there was a cost analysis we would find that the cost was net neutral in the end. From a hard costs perspective there would be less consultants, less outsourced work in general less. From a soft cost perspective, fewer expensive mistakes, fewer stalled and restarted processes, a closer eye on the cost of things. Importantly for folks thinking about the model and worried about reactions from donors, we have never once been questioned about the cost from a funder, even when working with very traditional and hierarchical bi-lateral donors who interrogated almost every other dollar in a budget. I've always found that very interesting actually.

We infer that while funding two (or more) executive salaries may look more expensive in the budget, there could be other costs that are reduced or avoided because of the positive benefits of co-leadership. For example, due to the encouraging nature of collaborative and reflective decision-making, two or more co-leaders may make better choices that avoid ineffective or financially costly projects or seize opportunities more quickly to raise additional financial or reputational resources. A recent article in Harvard Business Review argued that co-CEO models may be worth it. The authors looked closely at the performance of 87 public companies with co-CEOs and found they tended to produce more value for shareholders than their peers did (Feigen, Jenkins, and Warendh, 2022).

Additionally, co-leadership builds in some safety measures against the classic leadership burnout – that can leave an organisation with an unwell leader that may not be able to fulfil their own potential, or unexpectedly depart for some time or permanently. In the current world's dynamic and ever changing context of intersecting crises and change, having two or more EDs or CEOs enables organisations to have built in support systems and safety nets.



Costs: budget lines to consider

- Two or more salaries and benefits packages for co-leads.
- Professional development budgets for each co-lead.
- Travel for two or more co-leads for strategy and board meetings / internal workshops, budget for co-strategising.
- Coaching, technical consultants and wrap around support for co-leads.

Benefits: why co-leadership is worth it financially and cost reduction opportunities

- Better financial decision-making.
- Lessened need for additional leadership cover when one is off sick, on sabbatical or on leave.
- If things are going well, reduced HR and recruitment costs because of lower turnover.

Summary of overall benefits and challenges of co-leading

BENEFITS:

- + Better decision-making, effectiveness and overall impact of the organisation
- + More opportunities for strategic risk-taking and innovation
- + Increased mental wellbeing of leaders
- + More sustainable leaders and organisations
- + Intentional work cultures
- + May manage leadership burnout more easily

CHALLENGES:

- Decision-making may take longer, be miscommunicated or confused
- Potential for conflict due to competition and insecurity
- Alienation of other staff
- Managing staff expectations more broadly on feminist leadership in organisational contexts, and in particular for co-leaders.
- Perceived cost of two leadership salaries

Summary of things that often go wrong in co-leadership



Lack of clarity in the roles between co-leads. This can lead to work not being completed, no one being accountable for key areas of work, or tensions when co-leads are working on the same thing and neglecting other areas of their work.



Splitting the work too rigidly, working in silos, and not embracing the accountabilities that need to be shared and intertwined - especially finances, human resources, and strategic growth and development. There can be a tendency to split areas according to each co-leads strengths, and while this can work in terms of delegating a key person *responsible*, both co-leads need to be equally *accountable*.



Dividing the areas of work in terms of "internal" and "external" roles - co-leads need to be involved in both areas. This can work for some people, but for many this can result in limited visibility of the shared nature of the work and some dynamics over time. If this is an intentional decision, making it very explicit in hiring or distribution of work is key.



Not hiring or evaluating each co-lead with the expectation that they have the same core accountabilities to leading and managing the organisation.



Variance in pay / compensation, and/or a lack of transparency about this. This can lead to a feeling like the work is not equally valued or appreciated.

Summary
of things
that often
go wrong in
co-leadership



The co-leads are not matched well, one of them was not involved in the hiring process of the other, they did not pick each other and do not have chemistry or mesh well.



One or more of the co-leads is not self reflective, or actually wants to genuinely be in a co-leadership role. They feel they have comp



Shadow or direct positional power from a supervisor (whether a board member, more senior role, etc) can create a strange dynamic between the co-leads and sometimes mean one of the co-leads has more power or access than the other.



Adequate time is not dedicated to developing relationships, ways of working, spending time together, and developing practices of sharing feedback.



Lack of trust, commitment to the structure itself, and communication between co-leads. This impacts how the co-leads show up in the organisation and in the external world.

Concluding 7

thoughts & other

offerings

Concluding thoughts and other offerings

What we learned (and didn't learn)

Co-leadership is an increasingly popular model across multiple sectors. Having more than one leader is complex – and that complexity can lead to a stronger, happier, and more strategic organisation. That same complexity can also bring a distinct vulnerability to conflict and rupture.

This action research compiles the many reflections, insights, and experiences of co-leaders around the world, predominantly in the feminist and women's rights space. It is part of a larger conversation that can support more people and organisations to understand and practise co-leadership with intention.

In doing this research, many of our beliefs were tested but ultimately reinforced. The contributors articulated some of our thoughts better than we could, and offered their experiences to us so that we could link patterns into helpful recommendations for us all. Our tacit understanding of what makes co-leadership wonderful has expanded and matured into more formal knowledge that we hope is shared widely.

Repeated throughout, **our most valued learning from this study is that for co-leadership to have the greatest impact, it must be set up and practised with intention.** For it to be truly feminist co-leadership, it must be guided by a North star of political transformation. That is, it must be sensitive and attentive to flows of power, spreading and weaving manifestations of power in ways that disrupt the linear and vertical concentrations of power that are at the foundation of patriarchal, capitalist systems of inequality.

Collectivising power and decision-making to two or more leaders does not minimise the need for broader conversations and practices that work to share power across organisations and movements. Nor does it erase the current tendency of many – including feminist organisations – to have a never-ending to-do list and hurtle rapidly towards burn out. Nor does it erase the backdrop of structural oppressions and systemic failures that make up our world or make less complex the contradictory nature of trying to build alternatives ways of being. We recognise that co-leadership may make sense for some organisations, while for others it will not. There are different models to share leadership and power, and co-leadership offers one tangible way.

This report does not intend to paint a rose-coloured view or suggest that co-leadership is the answer to all challenges in relation to power, care and organisational or individual leaders' wellbeing. What co-leadership does is plant a seed, model a different way of being, demonstrate the power of different perspectives and voices, of collectively held processes, and support the organisation to embrace multiplicities and complexity.

In the cases where certain forms of co-leadership does not work out, there are a myriad of factors to explain this - whether it is an individual co-lead personally deciding the position is not right for them, the relationship doesn't work between the co-leads, or the organisation deciding a co-leader or structure is not right for the collective needs, and more. Because co-leadership is complex, we would urge everyone to remember that just because co-leadership does not work out in that moment for you or your organisation, does not mean it will *never* work.

Transformative leadership - and especially co-leadership - is no easy, quick feat. It requires collective action, not just from co-leaders but the other members of the organisation like the governance body and staff. This intention is not something achieved all at once, but slowly, over time. Many of us have been shaped by attitudes that make it hard for us to let go of power, cause us to feel ashamed of vulnerability, and drive us to compete at the expense of care for ourselves and each other. There is much unlearning to do.

There are some things that we feel are still not as clear, because we need more time and other perspectives to fully understand them. These include:

- ✱ A more in depth cost-benefit analysis of resourcing co-leads over an individual
- ✱ More comparative analysis on individual and co-leadership structures
- ✱ Unpack what might it take to explore this model in large scale formal leadership institutions, including heads of state, or private philanthropy or UN agencies.

We hope to attend to these gaps in time, and hopefully with others.

What else this study offers

We have woven the insights and lessons we gained from this study into practical tools or guideposts to support your co-leadership journey. Please make sure to read Part 2 of our research, "A practical guide to growing feminist co-leadership". The guide also relates to an accompanying Gallery of Tools for co-leadership found on the [website](#).

In addition, we have designed a set of cards and activities inspired by tarot, working with tarot readers and artists around the world. The mosaics and mirrors offer us again a metaphor for how these cards should be used. They should support co-leaders to spark conversations about how co-leaders will 'fit' together as distinct but connected pieces. They should illuminate reflections that may require vulnerability and courage in one's self and in each other. Finally, they should remind you of the beauty of authenticity and transformation.

The whole research paper can also be found on the website, as part of the collection of resources we are creating, gathering and sharing with you.

What we hope comes next

Looking forward, we are eager to see how these cards and other tools are used and whether they are helpful to others. We are excited to continue conversations in community with co-leads through coaching circles or collective reflection spaces. We hope that co-leaders will engage with our findings, share new practices or ideas, and help us refine what we have.

Our current offerings of the report, guides, and cards can be found together in one home, on a website that we hope will evolve and grow.



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