

# Impact Summary

## Gender-Based Violence Change Lab

### Where It Started & How It Evolved

The GBV Change Lab started with folks from across Righting Relations (RR) who expressed an interest, and with the learnings that were already being shared from other Change Labs. The Change Lab had 6 consistent members, representing all RR Hubs - three folks from the Central Hub, two from the West, and one from the East. Initial meetings were done in circle, and everything emerged quite organically, from emergent themes under GBV, to building the group agreements, to the direction of the group. These conversations were really exciting and energizing.

What became really clear to the members and crucial to the conversations was the **connection between GBV, colonial violence, and gender and sexual expansiveness.**

*"Specifically, we wanted to think about how GBV manifests beyond the traditional representation of heteronormative domestic and sexualized violence."* - GBV Change Lab member

The group had Indigenous women talking about the way that GBV is inflicted in their communities as a part of colonial violence. Not only in the form of child sexual abuse, but also in actions like forcing young men or boys to cut their hair as a form of punishment or assimilation in schools. The Change Lab also identified GBV in the context of queer and trans communities, and how colonization has included the imposition of gender binaries and heteronormativity into Indigenous communities that didn't see things that way, and how that continues to manifest in GBV today.

### Impact

One Indigenous member identified the parallels in the conversations with the GBV Change Lab and the Strengthening Men and Boys Change Lab. They introduced the idea of stories - not only individual stories from survivors which are so powerful, but also the cultural stories and teachings within them, and that they can be shared in so many different ways, including songs, poems, testimonials, and more. The idea of stories resonated strongly with the group.

Thus, the Change Lab dove into a survey of existing resources. They found a lot of academic resources and articles about survivors' stories from the MeToo movement, and various reflections in blogs from feminist circles, but they did not find many specific resources to adult education.

From that research, the group saw that a lot of the conversation around GBV stories was focused on confidentiality of survivors' stories, and the potential to exploit them in different ways (e.g. in the media or within feminist organizations or movements). Of

course, this was a concern for the group, and they focused a lot on how they could center stories in GBV adult education without retraumatizing or becoming exploitative, and rather sharing stories safely and respectfully while centering survivors' agency. They decided they would create a website where folks could share their stories, whether personal or cultural, in a wide range of formats like art, music, written statements, poems, and more - as a repository for adult educators.

A virtual talking circle on stories in GBV was hosted - folks from across RR and the wider community were invited to share their thoughts on how to approach this in a good way. The circle also invited new folks to join the Change Lab and was an experiential learning for folks not already involved in RR. It was a successful event, where very interesting reflections were shared, and several people were interested in joining the group. A women's homeless shelter group also joined the circle, which brought additional and important intersectional insights, such as being mindful of the experiences of houseless folks, sex workers, and folks who have been/are incarcerated.

Based on the talking circle event, the Change Lab decided to move ahead with a user-generated website. They focused on the logistics of ensuring safety and anonymity, preventing trolls, website maintenance and hosting, and more. In Dec 2023, the Change Lab hosted another circle at the Ignite Change Global Convention - the largest celebration for the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights - this time, more of a panel discussion-style circle with invited participants, which was a beautiful experience.

## **Learnings**

The Gender-Based Violence Change Lab had a rocky start, partly because of staffing changes within the administrative partner organization leading the group, and partly because of gatekeeping and tensions within mainstream GBV organizations. In terms of **staffing**, it took time to replace the Change Lab coordinator and the supporting organization had a new Executive Director transitioning into the role - thus, there was time and orientation required to bring together the group and set the stage for collaboration.

The **gatekeeping by mainstream GBV organizations** stemmed from a reluctance to open the circle of trust to a group that GBV-focused organizations were not familiar with, and who didn't have specific GBV background. This is understandable, given the time it takes to build relationships and trust, especially in a sector that aims to increase safety for people who have experienced violence and trauma. However, these hurdles created barriers for the Change Lab to meaningfully connect with potential allies.

There was also a unique challenge, given that **the group was bilingual**. Francophone members communicated in English, which was not their first language, but folks were great about speaking up about their needs and all agreed to be patient and curious with each other.

However, because the group had been slow to get started, they met every two weeks. As much as that was difficult to maintain across the different time zones and all members' schedules, it really **built momentum and connections quickly**.

**Meetings would have a loose agenda** - more like a set of points to address and some prompts - because folks liked having a sense of where they wanted to go when they started. Meeting would start with a check-in circle, have space to follow-up on points from the previous meeting, provide updates on action items, and then focus on the goals of the Change Lab and what the next steps would be.

Meetings were closed with open circles **reflecting on broad prompts**, for instance, questions like: what is intersectionality in GBV. This open-ended approach kept that curiosity alive, even when things started to move more into action items and outputs, as well as facilitated strong connections between the group, and informed the work as it went along.

### **Where to Now?**

Unfortunately, in autumn 2023, the Change Lab coordinator left for a new position. This left the lab stalled, as she was the one with the skills to build the website and also was being paid to do that work.

There is so much potential left in this Change Lab. The partner organization, Educonnexion, has agreed to work with Concordia University to build some adult education resources generated from the work of this lab, specifically from story-based work. However, with no coordinator for the final months of the WAGE-funded project, it has been uncertain how that next stage will move forward. A new team member at Educonnexion is taking on coordination of the project, so next steps with members and the new coordinator need to be identified.

In the end, even though the website was not built, the Change Lab and the conversations that were started have really identified strong potential in deeper and more intersectional GBV adult education, that can continue to be built upon.