

The Speed of Trust

Building National Justice and Equity Change Labs

Introduction

Righting Relations Canada (RRC) is a heart-led, national network of adult educators and community organizers working toward decolonization and radical social change through popular education. As an organization, one of our goals is to inspire national spaces, or communities of practice, to evolve around critical issue areas such as GBV, MMIWG, child welfare, anti-racism, disability justice, migrant rights, queer and trans liberation, and food sovereignty. We want to encourage members to connect with those of like work and skills in other hubs to facilitate growth in their work and practice. This will allow us to break the isolation of the work on challenging issues and allow members to strengthen each other through sharing knowledge, skills and critical analysis.

With this strategic objective in mind, Righting Relations Canada developed and submitted a proposal to Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada to support the growth of six key priority working groups called Change Labs. These priority working groups were identified from a 2019 National Gathering of members. The proposal focused on advancing collective work related to gender-based violence, Indigenous women's leadership, Black women's leadership, 2STLGBQIA+ leadership, Anti-Ableism, and Men and Boys leadership.

As a result, **The Uplifting Women and Uplifting Communities: Justice and Equity Change Labs Project** received funding from WAGE between December 2021 and March 2024. The goal of these Change Labs was to create a space for team members with lived experience to come together, critically analyze the issue at hand, identify root causes and key strategies for short- and long-term change, and develop learnings and outcomes that would contribute to the development of tools and resources for education and policy. From the original 6 proposed Change Labs, a total of 7 emerged throughout the project:

- Anti-Oppression
- Disability Justice
- Gender-Based Violence
- Queer Communities
- Non-Profit Solutions
- Strengthening Indigenous Women's Leadership
- Strengthening Men and Boys' Leadership

This report is intended to serve as a case study and model for other organizations and movements wishing to establish similar spaces of networking, collaboration, and innovation focused on social justice issues.



Structure and Approach

From the outset, the intention was to support each team in developing its own structure, processes, coordination, and objectives through a collaborative co-design process. Each Lab was asked to ground itself in the core values and ways of working essential to Righting Relations as a network: to be heart-led, to work towards building right relations, to use popular education approaches, and to use the circle method.

Women-led/Heart-led

A commitment to remain rooted in our ancestral heritages and teachings from the land; to ground in the feminine by showing courage and unconditional love, living from the heart, and stepping out of the mainstream; and to centre the voices of those who are dispossessed and marginalized within patriarchal systems.

Righting Relations

A commitment to unite our communities; to recognize Canada and colonization as patriarchal systems of disruption and displacement; to work to dismantle these systems in the world and our thinking; and to strive to recreate healthy ways of being together. Recognizing that we all have a collective responsibility to care for the human and natural world.

Popular Education

The understanding that Righting Relations is not one face or voice but a dynamic collective that keeps growing. We have power in unity, which is strengthened by feelings of belonging. A commitment to embody the principles of popular education in our work and our governance: we're all learners and teachers; we start where people are at; we trust in people and value each unique voice; we make the road by walking; we seek to love each others' humanity actively.

Circle Method

An approach grounded in the teachings and ways of being of many Indigenous nations on Turtle Island, the circle method has been a core way of working for Righting Relations since it was founded. Designed to create a brave and sacred space for difficult conversations and deep listening, circle processes are based on the principle of equality and shared power and responsibility in contrast to traditional hierarchical approaches to meetings and facilitation. Circles may look different depending on their purpose - whether the aim is storytelling, healing, working together, or decision-making - but always centre relationships and trust-building.



Processes & Procedures

Building trust, developing relationships, and maintaining participation were essential for the success of the Change Labs. Members came together to get to know each other, invest time sharing their stories, build strong bonds, and explore the chosen Change Lab issues. Change Labs met regularly (typically monthly or bi-monthly) to work together, and starting in Year 2 of the project, Change Lab Coordinators and project representatives met quarterly to connect and share knowledge. *“Moving at the speed of trust”* became a mantra that many Labs related to – this idea centred around the principle of understanding how to “be together” before groups started to “do together” and move with one voice.

Change Labs facilitated deep dives into issues in some of the following ways:

- In-depth discussions, reflections, and active listening;
- Giving space and time to define and explore the issues as a group;
- Gathering traditional knowledge;
- Ceremony and gatherings;
- Community-based research;
- Interviews and building relations with those with deep experience with the issues;
- Visual and verbal storytelling;
- Art such as popular theatre and crafting;
- Peer learning – policy analysis, conflict resolution, understanding discomfort;
- Sharing through the Righting Relations network.

All Change Labs engaged in critical analyses of their chosen issue and developed tools and resources to share broadly. Each Lab developed 1-4 tools, including workshops, presentations, reports, art, toolkit, website, videos, review of federal legislation, curriculum, and more. These tools and resources were developed, informed and guided by those with lived experience and underrepresented community members to ensure an inclusive and effective design.

Considerations for Project Implementation

In our experience, developing Change Labs moved steadily, though unevenly, for different Labs. Recruitment and orientation of coordinators and members took place over an extended time period for some Labs, and building relationships within each Change Lab was critical. The iterative approach in which many Labs operate enabled work to happen organically and fluidly as relationships were built and knowledge was gathered. Overall, the timeline of outcomes differed from what was expected and planned for, but the results were rich and rewarding.

Evolving Needs & Realities of the Project

Each Lab developed outputs in ways that met their needs. Many were different than anticipated, but all were beautiful and advanced the project's goals. Situational analyses took shape in the forms of: reports, planning and strategy documentation, frameworks for



learning, vision and brainstorming boards, and research. Internal surveys of tools and resources and developing strategies and plans for each Lab were mostly integrated into these analyses rather than separately. The tools and resources developed were diverse and creative and are listed below.

Planned outputs looked different for different Change Labs, as each group independently honoured its members' needs, realities, and experiences. For instance, the situational analyses and internal surveys completed by each Lab are diverse modes of documentation based on how the group works and learns; the tools and resources developed by each Lab are also creative expressions that focus on experiential learning.

Similarly, **each Lab developed its own internal processes that work for those involved.** These processes varied depending on the group: some developed community agreements, work plans, and specific deliverables, while others met in circle and allowed the discussion to flow organically with less documentation. Piloted tools and resources utilized different strategies, from workshops with external audiences and board members to review and input from other Change Labs with relevant experience.

Challenges

Identity-based spaces are necessary and rewarding but can be difficult to navigate. Early in the project, an emerging group sought to reflect on internalized anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in their communities. This team faced challenges in building trust and comfortable processes for all. At the time, conflict response and accountability protocols had not been clearly outlined within the scope of the change labs, so when members disclosed that they had experienced anti-Black racism within the group, the resulting conflict and distrust rippled out into the Black Women's Leadership change lab, causing members to step back and the group to fold. As a result, **The Anti-Oppression Change Lab and the Women of Colour Circle** emerged as spaces to process and remediate some of those issues.

Learnings from that experience, along with the intricacy of building or expanding their circles that other change labs described, led many members in the labs and across Righting Relations more generally to take the motto "moving at the speed of trust" to heart both while sitting in circle and while building change labs or other teams. It speaks not only to the recognition that when we rush, we increase the likelihood of misunderstandings and conflict but also to the need not to move work forward before trusting relationships have been built. The experience also informed the creation of project management guidelines and the ongoing co-creation of national conflict response and accountability mechanisms.

Other challenges that different change labs experienced included access to technology to facilitate online spaces, scheduling across time zones, the continued impact of COVID-19, and changing member capacity over time.



Balancing Processes & Outcomes

Members of the Change Labs invested a lot of time, work, and emotions into those spaces, and as a result, most describe taking away learnings that have been incorporated into their daily lives. Members also expressed a shared feeling of responsibility to communicate these learnings so that they nurture the rest of Righting Relations and other organizations. However, all agreed that these **learnings can be shared in many ways and formats, not always written down**. Different people and groups will likely apply these learnings differently, so templates are not always appropriate. In addition, processes of empathy and understanding are key. For example, members of the Indigenous Women's Leadership Change Lab supported the Righting Relations circle in Edmonton in a conversation about Land Acknowledgements in March 2023, demonstrating both the impact of the Change Lab on individual members and the connections built across the Righting Relations network. The recognition of leadership, and the confidence developed by Change Lab members to support the Righting Relations network, was an outcome seen consistently across the Change Labs.

Having a balance between being in and following the process, and focusing on outcomes and agendas, was also identified as an important learning. Having an intention but not an agenda (and vice versa) can create tension. For example, an agenda with too rigid a direction doesn't allow a process to emerge. On the other hand, spaces for open discussion without any direction can be unfocused. Coordinators reflected that having an agenda or agreed-upon purpose, but being flexible and willing to follow emergent conversations, balanced the need to move forward while creating opportunities to embrace what comes from the discussion. Again, moving at the speed of trust means that the objective is to listen to each other, make space for deep thinking and honesty, and not rush.

Outputs, Impacts & Learnings from Change Labs

Disability Justice Change Lab

Output	Impact	Learnings
Ableism in Adult Education workshop (March 2022)	Internal Impact: Members developed confidence, capacity to express their needs, and connections. Members work together outside of RR by recommending each other for opportunities and supporting each other in meetings	



Review and response to the federal disability inclusion action plan	Internal impact: reviewing and responding to the action plan has been validating for Change Lab members and has advanced their understanding of current and historical federal accessibility strategies. This process has influenced how members engage in disability rights and disability justice advocacy in their personal and professional lives.	There is a deep need for disability-led visioning regarding accessibility and inclusion policies and strategies. There is often a lack of concrete and measurable actions around disability inclusion. Responses must be grounded in the lived experiences of folks with disabilities to amplify their voices and reinforce their need for involvement at all strategy and implementation levels.
Accessibility & Inclusive Facilitation Guidelines	These guidelines have been shared with collaborators and partners, influencing the expectations for speakers, facilitators, and presenters in Righting Relations.	
Event-planning guide and accessibility checklist	The RR network has changed the process of planning in-person and hybrid events by giving veto power to this group when assessing the accessibility of venues for gatherings at the National level. Improved capacity to hold hybrid events has been developed and implemented at the National level	Despite the increase in virtual and hybrid events due to COVID, there continues to be a lack of understanding about the different kinds of accessibility support required during hybrid events.
Ableism in Adult Education presentation & micro workshop (May 2023)	Participants described this workshop as opening their eyes to the presence of ableism in their everyday life and their workspaces Based on the presentation, collaborator organizations intended to revisit their internal	



	policies and procedures.	
Responding to the Federal Disability Action Plan - Panel Discussion (Dec 2023)	Positive responses from members and attendees; increased attention to disability policy vs. lived/living experience of disabled people. Disabled attendees felt validated and heard.	This response needs to be developed into a more official shadow report to better connect with decision-makers in the federal and provincial/territorial governments.

Queer Change Lab

Output	Impact	Learnings
Building Utopia Zine	Positive responses were received from both individuals and organizations, who described it as both a powerful and timely resource for education and a source of connection and empowerment for queer/GSE folks. For Change Lab members, this led to feeling validated and seen and enjoying the comfort and freedom given by sharing space with Queer-only members. Members are now brought in to deliver education sessions to organizations that are part of RR	It can be difficult to disseminate resources on this particular topic using usual methods such as social media, as the topic makes any posts high targets for shadow banning and negative interactions/trolling. Sharing using email outreach and print copies of the resource proved more effective.
Building Utopia Zine: presentation and pilot workshop (May 2023)	The responses from participants were very positive. The workshop impacted the way that individual participants and the West Hub as a whole approach facilitation by grounding in activities and approaches that do not make gender identity assumptions	There is a need for support when having difficult conversations with family members and colleagues around gender and sexuality.



Supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth workshop (Sept 2023)	Volunteers and partner organizations improved their capacity for engaging with 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in a supportive and equitable way in their outreach and advocacy work	
Framework for operating principles for RR (pg 6-7 of Zine)	Has helped guide and shape the discussions around policies and protocols for Righting Relations	

Non-Profit Solutions Change Lab

Output	Impact	Learnings
Reflections on Transforming the Non-Profit Sector: Addressing Toxicity in Non-Profits: A Survey	For Change Lab members, this led to validation, support, and a chance to work through traumatic experiences. Identification of opportunities to expand with a focus on engagement.	The responses and results were powerful, but they needed to be placed within a wider context and with opportunities for audiences to engage and reflect.
Transforming the Non-Profit Sector, summary survey presentation and report	The presentation sparked and influenced governance conversations within Righting Relations.	
Reflections on Transforming the Non-Profit Sector: Addressing Toxicity in Non-Profits (the toolkit)	Learnings and activities from this toolkit were centred on conversations about governance and operations within Righting Relations There was a lot of uptake and interest, as issues resonated with many in the sector. Organizations and individuals appreciated the resource, and colleagues referred to using the toolkit for their organizational development. Umbrella	Resources are needed to implement and support non-profit organizations to engage with this toolkit fully.



	organizations and collectives in Ontario and Alberta shared the toolkit publicly with their membership. Organizations have also requested workshops and support implementing the toolkit.	
NPO transformation workshop (pilot with JHC Board, Oct 2022, Summer 2023)	Board members developed a list of priority issues to address and took decisive action to connect with and build relationships with staff.	
Internal lunch and learn sessions for RR members (June - Sept 2023)	A lot of uptake and interest, participants shared personal stories of the impact of engaging with the toolkit, such as validation, influencing conversations with colleagues, and influencing facilitation techniques.	There is significant potential for this work to be geared more intentionally towards organizations and decision-makers who may be unable to find it organically.

Anti-Oppression Change Lab

Output	Impact	Learnings
Anti-Oppression Organizational Development Curriculum	This proposed curriculum inspired 6 internal sessions focused on building a shared Anti-Oppression foundation; they have now led to the development of 4 additional facilitated organizational development sessions to build accountability protocols and practical anti-racism/Anti-Oppression policies collectively.	While revisiting Anti-Oppression principles and establishing a shared understanding of white supremacy is essential, workshops must include adequate time for participants to discuss, reflect, and apply the learnings to the organization.
Women of Colour Breathing Circle	Black and other racialized women impacted by the conflict within the Black Women's Leadership Change Lab were able to support each other in	It is necessary to recognize lingering distrust after experiences of harm within an organization or movement and provide spaces for



	their processing, healing, and accountability-seeking journeys.	connection and healing without intervention or external expectation.
--	---	--

Gender-Based Violence Change Lab

Output	Impact	Learnings
Stories of Survivors of Gender-Based Violence Workshop (Facilitation Guide)	Participants reported an increased understanding of the different ways that gender-based violence manifests. Members developed a deeper understanding of the complexities and responsibilities of engaging with survivors' stories.	At the outset of this Change Lab, connecting with mainstream GBV organizations was difficult, which seemed to stem from distrust and gatekeeping. However, other sectors, such as Housing, showed interest.
Stories and Gender-Based Violence Public Panel Discussion (Recording)	Attendees developed an improved understanding of the power of stories in GBV-related journeys, as well as the different cultural dynamics that intersect with the experience of gender-based violence.	

Indigenous Women's Leadership Change Lab

Output	Impact	Learnings
Drops of Wisdom videos: • Knowledge from Grandmothers • Nurturing Women, Our Kinship • Decolonizing our Creation Story • Connecting Women	Indigenous women from across RR and beyond responded positively to these videos, expressing gratitude for the insight from members on issues such as inclusive ceremonies.	There is a need for a more intentional campaign to promote and release these videos to increase viewership.



Across Mother Earth • Sharing Women's Teachings • Inclusion in Ceremony		
Righting Relations Governance Model	Inspired by conversations of the IWL Change Lab, two lab members were invited to speak at the Righting Relations National Steering Committee Gathering in June 2022 and again at the full National Gathering in October 2023. Their teachings about Indigenous governance models are being integrated into RRC's governance, policies, and protocols with the intent that this model can be shared with other organizations.	It is difficult to balance providing consistency at an organization's national level and respecting the agency of the regional Hubs and Circles doing work in the community. Clear communication and well-established roles, responsibilities, and expectations are crucial.
Various public speaking opportunities for Indigenous women	Members demonstrated increased confidence in speaking at external events and were more comfortable proposing and initiating community projects.	It is difficult to capture the interconnecting impacts of a member's increased confidence in retrospect; we recommend developing a framework for measuring this at the outset.

Strengthening Men and Boys' Leadership Change Lab

Output	Impact	Learnings
Traditional Wabanaki Practices and Frameworks of Men's Leadership (report)	This report offers important insight for other RR members about the work being done in this area and different frameworks available to support men's leadership	When the majority of a group shares a cultural background, it is difficult to balance the group's time and capacity between the focus and the need to share teachings with unfamiliar members.



Monthly Strengthening Men's Talking Circle	Members - people who work with and support men and boys to have healthy relationships - have gained support from each other, shared best practices, and accessed emotional support to be able to continue doing this work.	People working with men who have caused harm are often more isolated than those working with survivors; therefore, there is a large gap in support for those doing this transformative work.
--	--	--

Impact Summaries

Due to the differing speeds, approaches, structures, and outcomes across the Change Labs, measuring and evaluating their impact was difficult. This was also complicated by the reality that many of the most profound learnings and takeaways from each Change Lab took the form of personal growth, connections, and reflections. To better capture the different experiences of each Lab and how they influenced members, the RR network, and beyond, the RRC Learning and Growth team developed a [facilitation guide](#) for an [Impact Summary process](#) to capture and share the stories of each Change Lab.

Interviews were conducted in the final 6 months of the project, and the resulting summaries were shared with Change Lab coordinators and/or members to ensure accuracy and accountability.

- [Disability Justice Change Lab Impact Summary](#)
- [Anti-Oppression Change Lab Impact Summary](#)
- [GBV Change Lab Impact Summary](#)
- [Queer Change Lab Impact Summary](#)
- [Indigenous Women's Leadership Change Lab Impact Summary](#)
- [Non-Profit Solutions Change Lab Impact Summary](#)
- [Strengthening Men and Boys' Change Lab Impact Summary](#)