

FEMINIST LEADERSHIP UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Learning & Reflection resource

HIERARCHY AND FEMINISM - LIKE OIL AND WATER?

In September 2023, the first session of "Feminist Leadership Under Construction," a collaboration between **Akina Mama wa Afrika**, **FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders** and **We Are Feminist Leaders**, took place. This series of conversations aims to explore how we operationalise the feminist revolution and in this first session, we focused on hierarchy and organisational structure.

Along with guest speakers Hope Chigudu (Hope Africa, JASS Just Associates), Aruna Rao (Gender at Work, SOAS), and Maya Tamayo (BAYI Inc, Angat Bayi) and the 100+ attendees, we swapped insights and looked at the challenges and opportunities in structuring responsibility and decision-making power in ways that embody feminist values.

We'd like to wholeheartedly thank our brilliant guest speakers for generously bringing their energy and wisdom to the space.

This short briefing shares some of the key questions discussed, insights shared and resources for ongoing exploration of the topic.

■ [Watch the recording](#)

■ [View the wordcloud](#)

Discussions & insights

We arrived at this conversation informed by and in gratitude for almost 50 years of research by feminists on how organisational structures are gendered and how different types of organisational structures produce and reproduce power relations. For example, see the work of **Kathy Ferguson**, **Joan Acker**, **Raewyn Connell**, **Fiona Mackay**, **Hope Chigudu** and many others.



This research, along with the work of feminists and activists working in organisations was highlighted by Aruna Rao: "What is striking is how much women working in hierarchical structures have been able to achieve, despite all the challenges". Aruna made the point that feminists, including those working in large, bureaucratic, hierarchical organisations have leveraged their own individual power within as well as collective power with other feminists to push for feminist change.

Aruna also spoke about the fact that “hierarchies are not monoliths. There are holes within them where we as feminists can strategise... We need to look for these spaces where we as feminists can organise in the cracks and crevices in organisations.”

She also reminded us to ask ourselves “What is the purpose of all of this?” Noting that our work as feminists is not simply to change practices for the purpose of changing practices, but to centre on the realisation of our feminist goals, and acknowledge the real dilemmas we face when working in organisations whose goals contradict ours.



Hope Chigudu shared her experience of co-creating the feminist organisation JASS, which drew from an approach taken by many historic African societies in which leadership was not about the centralisation of power, but “a chief was a chief not because they had power, but because they had the capacity to enable

everyone, and to create an atmosphere where everyone could thrive and knew they were wanted.”

Hope also reminded us of what is lost when funders demand and impose certain structures, role allocations and board arrangements from feminist organisations that have been used to flatter, more collective organising models. She shared experiences of how organisations can lose passion, energy and a culture that allows everyone to bring every aspect of themselves to work when rigid hierarchical structures are adopted. Hope spoke about how the collective capacity to deal with conflict in a positive, generative way can be compromised within a hierarchical structure.



Maya Tamayo reminded us that hierarchy is not just imposed by donors - in many countries, it is a legal requirement for non-profits to adopt hierarchical governance structures. Her organisation has tried to navigate around these requirements the best it can. Maya also spoke about the way in which, when

considering hierarchies, power can be critiqued “even in the smallest structure, process or relationship - we can be mindful of who has power and ensure we create space for everyone.” She shared the example of needing space for all staff to feel comfortable and safe to raise complaints.

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Maya also spoke about the way in which, when considering hierarchies, power can be critiqued “even in the smallest structure, process or relationship - we can be mindful of who has power and ensure we create space for everyone.”

Maya's organisation has developed a 'seven Cs of Feminist Governance' which emphasises the difference of a feminist approach: "Unlike the traditional hierarchical leadership structure, collective leadership embraces collective accountability."

Aruna reminded us to remember organisational deep structures within this discussion on hierarchy. Deep structures can be defined as the "collection of values, culture and practices that form the normal, unquestioned ways of working in an organisation" (Gender at Work, 2015). They are part of all our organisational cultures and form the 'normal', unquestioned ways of working in an organisation - critically, this is where inequalities can be reproduced. She asked, "What must we do to change them?"

Reflection questions

These critical reflection questions were posed by the audience, as well as our panellists.

1. What actually leads to the abuse of power in organisations - is it the hierarchical organisational structure, or is something else going on?
2. How do we manage power relations within organisational hierarchies in a just, equitable way? Can it truly be done?
3. How do you hold people accountable in flatter organisational structures? Is the issue really hierarchy, or is it all about how we exercise our power as feminists? How can hierarchy enable feminist goals?

Resources

[The Tyranny of Structurelessness](#) by Jo Freeman (1972)

[Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation](#) by Srilatha Batliwala/CREA (2010)

Video: [Srilatha Batliwala: Engaging with Feminist Leadership](#)

Video: [Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation Symposium](#)

[Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul](#) by Hope Chigudu, Rudo Chigudu (2021)

[All About Power](#) by Srilatha Batliwala

[Gender at Work: Theory and Practice for 21st Century Organizations](#) by Aruna Rao, Joanne Sandler, David Kelleher and Carol Miller (2015)

[Feminists in Development Organizations](#) by Rosalind Eyben, Laura Turquet (2013)

[The African Feminist Charter](#) (2006)

