

# BEST PRACTICES

## FOR BUILDING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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Equal Futures  
NETWORK



RÉSEAU  
Avenir égalitaire



# Best Practices and Lessons Learned to Avoid Tokenism in Gender Equality Work



As we build and strengthen relationships across the gender equality ecosystem, the [Equal Futures Network](#) has had the opportunity to work with a variety of different community members and learned a variety of lessons when it comes to building authentic, mutually beneficial relationships that prioritize putting their knowledge, experiences and expertise of our partners at the forefront of our work. It is our responsibility as a Network to ensure that we are doing our due diligence and be active participants in the tangible work to support reconciliation while coming out strong against all forms of racism, homophobia and transphobia and other challenges impacting our community members and partners. We know that better relationships and engagement will result in increased connection, collaboration and capacity strengthening to advance gender equality and social justice yet getting started can be daunting and there can be a paralyzing sense of uncertainty when it comes to starting these conversations and relationships. In particular, a fear of tokenism or performatism - the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to be inclusive to members of equity deserving groups - can stop you before you even get started! The Network has grappled with this question throughout our coalition building process and below have shared some best practices and lessons learned when it comes to moving forward building authentic partnerships and some next steps to get you started!

## 1. BUILD INTERNAL COMPETENCIES AND KNOWLEDGE

Building internal competencies and Knowledge is the first, and perhaps most important step in this process. Relationship building and maintaining partnerships is a continuous process that requires critical self-reflection around one's values, beliefs, worldview and innate biases and judgments. Fostering a space that prioritizes breaking down systemic barriers and putting the needs and priorities of your partners at the forefront and centre of your work can be an uncomfortable and challenging process but ultimately, create an organizational culture that fosters positive relationships. In order to do this it is important to:

- a. **Provide cultural safety training and promote learning opportunities** to raise awareness of the history and current socio-political landscape of systemic barriers and challenges impacting the communities you want to engage. In particular, building knowledge that reflects upon cultural, historical, and structural differences and power relationships and all of their broad impacts is key to ensuring that there is not only organizational knowledge but also individual respect and understanding when it comes to working with different groups, their individual challenges and how to support their work.
- b. **Review and engage with key documents, tools and resources**, and commit to remaining informed and continuing the learning journey.
- c. **Engage in critical thinking**, to understand what it means to actively commit to building and strengthening partnerships and engagement, remain accountable to this work, and recognize power, privilege and positionality as well as the responsibilities that ensue.

## 2. DEVELOP ENGAGEMENT PLAN AND PRINCIPLES

Developing an engagement plan will help guide your engagement work, and provide clarity on the roles, objectives, and mutual gains resulting from potential partnerships. Engagement plans should be considered living documents in order to be responsive to feedback received from current work with your partners and community members as engagement progresses, as well as to changing circumstances relating to external factors. It is also recommended that:

- a. **The engagement plan** identifies broad timelines, activities and opportunities, including mutually beneficial actions and initiatives. Be clear and transparent about constraints, and discuss expectations about objectives and outcomes honestly.
- b. **Avoid 'one-size-fits-all' partnership models** and work with potential partners to discuss and co-create the right approach for each partnership. Thus, the engagement plan must be flexible, adaptive and amendable.
- c. **Engage** early to provide more opportunities for developing plans that are more responsive to the interests and priorities of your partners.
- d. **Draft engagement principles** that uphold principles of reciprocity, accountability and relationality and demonstrate a willingness to grow beyond personal and institutional policies, practices and procedures.

We have shared our own *Strategic Engagement Plan and Principles for Engagement* to support you getting started to build your own! You can find this [here](#).

## 3. FOCUS ON THE PROCESS

Relationships are the heart of a partnership, and they take time to build. Nurturing constructive long-term relationships that are based on mutual respect, trust, collaboration, and accountability may not always align with your engagement

plan, expectations from funders or organizational priorities but they are the central pillar to ensuring that tokenism and performatism are minimal and ensuring the process of relationship building is top of mind is key. It is also recommended that:

- a. **Relationships are the foundation for good engagement.** Extra care needs to be invested in establishing and sustaining good relationships. This ground work takes time but it will strengthen the relationship in the long-term.
- b. **Engagement is an ongoing, reciprocal and cyclical process** that involves continually holding up principles and protocols defined by those in relationship.
- c. **Develop conditions of trust and shared understanding** to support strong, collaborative, and reciprocal partnerships.
- d. **Relationship building cannot be not outcome-based.**
- e. **Show up and be present** by visiting the community or organization to listen, learn, and share.
- f. **Be open and consistent** in communication, and use appropriate and accessible communication methods. Listen, more than speak.

#### 4. ENGAGE COMMUNITY

The communities you are working with are not single, monolithic entities. A vital component to building relationships is an awareness of the rich history, diversity, cultures and needs across the depth and breadth of your partnerships. It is also recommended that:

- a. **Be inclusive of a diverse range of people and organizations.** There is no individual who represents the collective opinions of one group/community. Ensure that you are using your power to invite different perspectives and opinions to the table, especially those who may be historically underrepresented and left on the outside.
- b. **Nurture diverse relationships** and be inclusive of individuals and groups who each have their own perspectives and experiences. Ensure that you are being clear in your intentions and take the time to learn the concerns of each of these diverse relationships as these will take time to strengthen. Be up-front about the value-add for these communities and what they will get from working with you.
- c. **Create space** within your organization to meaningfully engage with these groups and communities. Whether that be a place on an Advisory Committee or devoting time specifically to nurture these relationships, ensure that they are not an after-thought. Representation matters and building relationships requires time, capacity and resources.

#### 5. ADDRESS BARRIERS, CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Mainstream organizations and institutions can knowingly or unknowingly reproduce harm, so it is crucial to anticipate how the work could negatively impact community and minimize or stop those harms. It is also recommended that:

- a. **Recognize capacity challenges.**
- b. **Recognize resource limitations.**
- c. **Address institutional barriers** and policies and procedures that may be irrelevant, inappropriate, or harmful by challenging the norms within your organization.