



## GIRLS ACTION NETWORK

Reflecting on Systems Change through the Politics of Place

*Tatiana Fraser, Nisha Sajnani, Alyssa Louw, and Stephanie Austin*

In this chapter, we engage in a reflexive process of studying an organization for girls with which we have all been involved as adult women. While engaging in a reflexive exercise, we ask the following questions: What can we learn about networks as vehicles for change? What have we learned from facilitating a diverse network, and how have we come to know this? Where does this process take us?

This chapter has two main sections. First, it presents the theoretical frameworks that have informed the growth, theory of change, and impact of the Girls Action Foundation (GAF)<sup>1</sup> and the Girls Action Network (GAN).<sup>2</sup> The second section identifies politics of place within the network and reflects on what has been learned through practice, in order to better understand how diverse networks can act as vehicles for social change. By analyzing the results of a recent evaluation (Fraser et al. 2013a) of the network alongside focus group discussions with Girls Action staff, we identify key issues and provide direction for moving forward. Our goal is to inform network theory and practice as well as to share knowledge with other girlhood scholars working to effect systems change in girls' lives.

### Looking Back to Look Forward

We come to this point of reflection through different kinds of involvement with GAF. Tatiana Fraser and Stephanie Austin co-founded the organization in 1995; Tatiana continued on as Executive Director until 2011, and Stephanie serves as Chair of the Board of Directors. Nisha Sajnani has played a central role in developing Girls Action Foundation training curricula and facilitating annual retreats with network members since 2003, while Alyssa Louw more recently became involved in 2012 as a community researcher. In 2013, after ten years of developing

the network, we wanted to evaluate its impact to gather insight into how we should move forward.

## **A Brief History**

GAF ([girlsactionfoundation.ca](http://girlsactionfoundation.ca)) creates and supports popular education programs for girls and young women through a flexible, responsive network model. The following are the organization's major milestones:

*1995.* Stephanie Austin, Tatiana Fraser, and Willow Scoble co-founded POWER Camp. After noticing a gap in violence prevention, health promotion, and leadership education for girls, they developed a local program in Ottawa that combined fun, arts-based activities with feminist values, and pedagogical approaches that address issues faced by girls.

*2001.* Following requests to borrow the model for similar initiatives, POWER Camp met with ten local programs from across Canada to explore how best to expand and advance grassroots work for girls. The organizers started to think strategically by asking the following questions: How do you seed girls' programs, share a complex approach to supporting girls, and respect the diversity of communities and their need for programs that respond to local contexts? How can we scale up the approach while supporting and respecting local contexts, leadership, and expertise? From this, an informal, diverse, and loosely structured network began to form.

*2003.* POWER Camp National was launched, and, in partnership with Concordia and McGill Universities, the first Canadian National Girlhood conference, entitled Transforming Spaces: Girlhood, Agency and Change, took place. The launch provided the occasion for the first annual retreat for national network members, which became an anchor for the network by facilitating face-to-face learning and exchange.

*2005.* An annual National Day of Action was launched, as a means of co-ordinating and creating action-oriented projects to raise awareness about issues facing girls and their communities.

*2007.* The organization initiated Amplify, a national girls training program where cohorts of twenty organizations come together shortly before a retreat for intensive four-day training on the design and delivery of popular education programs for girls. Network members requested regional meetings during the year, which became known as

Zoom gatherings, organized in cities across Canada with help from the national office.

2008. Noticing a persistent lack of resources supporting young women's leadership, the Girls Action Foundation launched Elle, a national leadership training program.

2009. POWER Camp National changes its name to the Girls Action Foundation.

2013. Ten years after the first retreat, the network had grown to engage over 350 individuals and organizations. The annual Amplify and Elle training programs and regional Zoom gatherings continued, while the Girls Action national office developed web tools including newsletters, social media, a website, blogs, and webinars to support exchanges between network members.

## **The Philosophy behind GAF**

GAF programs are informed by integrated feminist analysis in that the challenges girls face are understood in relation to the social structures and intersecting systems of power and control that influence them. The programs do not see young women as passive recipients of knowledge but instead situate them as experts in their own lives, able to effect change through collaborative, creative, and differentiated action. They aim to support girls and those who work with them to identify and address the internalized (e.g. self-harm), relational (e.g. bullying, dating violence), and systemic violence (e.g. poverty, racism, sexism) in girls' lives and communities (Berman and Jiwani 2002). Leadership skills, media literacy, sexual health, and violence prevention are fostered through all-girl spaces, which offer resources and encouragement for girls to be agents of change in their own social and community networks.

GAN is comprised of organizations that share these values and support and work with girls and young women across the country:

- 87 percent of network members work with girls in low-income neighborhoods
- 40 percent of members have significant participation from Aboriginal girls
- 45 percent work with racialized girls and young women
- 19 percent work in northern or rural communities
- 24 percent work with LGBTQ communities

Network members focus on a diverse range of issues. However, the network creates an integrated web to foster knowledge, resource sharing, collaboration, and new initiatives. This community of practice thrives on peer learning across diverse communities and has created numerous skill- and capacity-building opportunities. But it is also a community of influence in that the network shapes the national office's focus. As the network has grown, our national programs, advocacy, and research efforts have been shaped by the issues around which network members' energies seemed to bubble and cluster.

## Key Theories and Models that Inform the Network

### *Complexity Theory*

GAN's early form took direction from several network models. For example, we deployed a model inspired by complexity theory (Zimmerman et al. 1998), which emphasizes using minimum specifications (*min specs*), the fewest requirements necessary to define something. Keeping min specs in mind allowed us to identify the key principles that would seed girls programs: popular education (Freire 1970) wherein learning is emergent, collaborative, and action-oriented with a focus on challenging unequal power relations; an integrated feminist analysis that takes into account how girls' and young women's lives are informed by multiple systems of power and control; and an asset-based strategy that values the strengths of girls and their communities rather than focusing only on their deficiencies and challenges. This network model resonated with the feminist values inherent in our work by challenging traditional hierarchical models of scaling up. Instead, we chose to scale up *and* scale deep by valuing local knowledge, leadership, and diverse forms of expertise while keeping intact our min specs. We felt that this approach to movement-building would allow communities to engage and collaborate without falling prone to the traps of national-level identity politics or the limitations of traditional organizing structures.

### *Social Network Theory*

GAN is also informed by social network theory; specifically, it is influenced by current theory, which differs from traditional paradigms in a number of meaningful ways. Broadly speaking, current theory conceives of networks as clusters of mutually beneficial relationships between social entities (individuals, organizations) that are interdependent, that

are bottom-up, and that emerge through mutually shared goals (see Wheatley and Frieze 2006; Christensen et al. 2006). In contrast, traditional network theory maps out hierarchical structures, metrics, and the roles of social entities within a network (Wasserman and Faust 1994; Borgatti and Foster 2003). Whereas traditional theories tend to produce linear, mechanistic descriptions of network behavior, newer theories focus on networks' emergent, self-organizing properties. Moore and Westley describe the qualities of these newer models.

Most generally, networks are considered to be a mode of coordination characterized by integration across vertical, horizontal, and spatial boundaries. They are decentralized, flexible, and self-adaptive structures that feature multi-directional relationships and rely on norms of trust and reciprocity. Constituent units retain their individual autonomy but participate in processes that affect the network as a whole. Social networks are a form of social organization defined by the patterns of vertical and horizontal relationships, or 'ties.' Social networks consist of strong ties, or 'bonding' relationships and weak ties, known as 'bridging' relationships, as described by authors such as Granovetter (1973), Putnam (2000), Newman and Dale (2005). The ties can be undirectional or directional (2011: 5).

Research on the ties of these structural patterns shows several different network topologies, including star-shaped networks, small-world networks, and scale-free networks (Moore and Westley 2011). Considered structurally, the ties that form GAN resemble a multiple-hub small-world pattern.

### *Lifecycle of Emergence*

Another idea that we have drawn on is Wheatley and Frieze's (2006) notion of a lifecycle of emergence, described as a three-stage process. The first stage involves bringing together networks of like-minded people based on mutual self-interest and characterized by fluid membership, depending on the personal gains and losses of members. Communities of practice develop in the second stage; they share resources, concern for one another, and a commitment to advancing their field. Many new ideas are generated and implemented during this period. Stage three is characterized by the emergence of systems of influence. This phase occurs spontaneously, and, as Wheatley and Frieze note, it is impossible to map how these systems emerge. At this point, they explain, policy and funding debates often involve innovative network members who may have been originally ignored, and the new practices they recommend become the norm. The lifecycle of the emergence model offers

a clear and detailed description of how networks can transform small community initiatives into global systems of influence. This model is of particular importance to GAN now as members consider how their collective practices have given it form.

### *Scaling Out, Scaling Up, and Adapting to Change*

Westley et al. (2011) address how non-profit organizations can expand their influence on social structures by scaling out (replicating and disseminating innovations) and scaling up (addressing larger institutional root problems). Moore and Westley (2011) expand on this, emphasizing that networks need diversity in order to effect systems change while sustaining strong bonds that support trust and reciprocity. That is, they need to recognize that different phases of adaptive cycles require different structures. The challenges lie in knowing who is in the network, understanding the nature of those relationships, determining whether these connections offer resources, and identifying ways to leverage those resources.

Moore and Westley emphasize the importance of agency and institutional entrepreneurs (those who help to transform a system) and the skills required by networks to support innovation. These include pattern generation, relationship building and brokering, knowledge and resource brokering, and recharging the network. This is the role that the GAF national office plays—discerning larger, emerging patterns and themes, making connections between members to maximize resources and opportunities, and convening gatherings to facilitate assessments of the network's identity and direction.

### *Girls Action Theory of Change: Network Model and Systemic Change*

Systemic social change is at the heart of our change theory. While GAN's programs serve as tools for girls' empowerment to create social change, keeping an eye on the bigger picture allows the network to stay connected to systemic issues facing girls and young women. The national office supports the network by providing opportunities to convene and carry out research to help members to make connections between the challenges faced by their participants, such as girls' lack of self-confidence, and the systemic inequalities related to gender, race, class, and other axes of social difference. The process of reframing and politicizing issues through discussion and critical thinking with girls creates opportunities for them to break out of isolation, to gain knowledge and tools, to build communities, and to take action for change that is mean-

ingful to them. This approach encourages girls to locate their experiential realities within a broader sociopolitical context.

Taken together, these theories contributed to the articulation of our own theory of change, depicted in Figure 9.1. The GAF *Theory of Change* (2013d) sets out multilevel strategies across local girls' programs, young women's leadership initiatives, and in the network to maximize the exchange of knowledge. This multi-pronged approach both supports a community of practice and aims to influence systems change. The GAF theory of change cites systemic change as a key objective, as described on our website:

We believe that individual and/or collective social action can lead to social change, which has the potential to create a socially just world. Our approach to social justice is context-specific: it develops and advocates for alternatives grounded in young women's realities. In working towards social justice, the Girls Action approach promotes transformative change directed towards altering existing social structures and frameworks.

Evaluating and articulating this impact has been a challenge over the years, and this must continue to be refined, clarified, and strengthened. Evidence is easier to measure when one is dealing with linear change models and quantitative data, but GAF's approach understands that

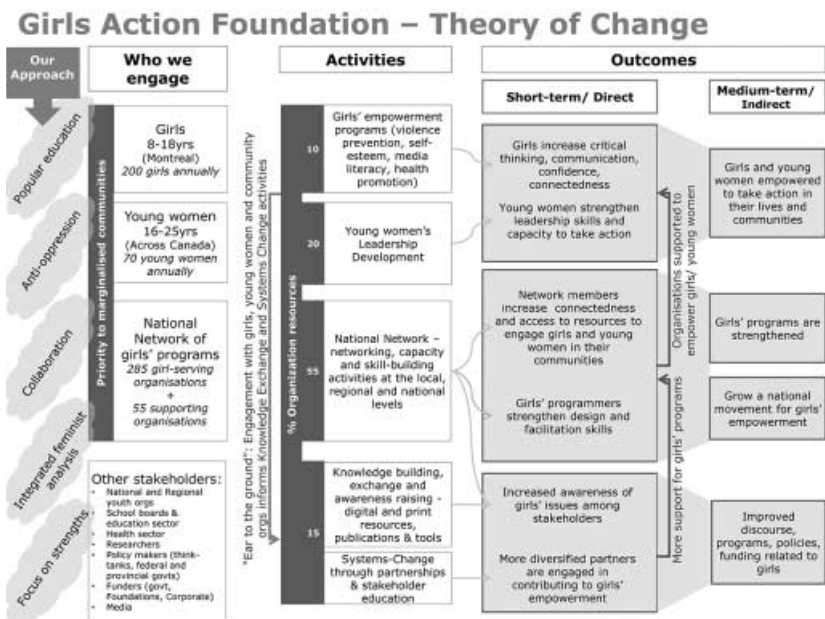


Figure 9.1. Girls Action Foundation's Theory of Change.

girls' realities are complex, and we have tried to take this into consideration in our programming and theory of change. When asked what impact the network has had, one member responded that

it is creating leaders. These girls and what they learned at the girls group impact their families, their peers and the community at large. These are girls that are now well-versed in their rights, healthy relationships, conflict resolutions skills, and communication skills. These skills will benefit the entire community—especially considering it is a small/isolated community, rampant with violence against women. Strong girls and strong female leaders is exactly what is needed. Also, through the program they are gaining social activism skills, which they can access within themselves later when they need it. ... When girls are told they have a voice and are given spaces where they can learn about themselves and important issues in the community and feel empowered, they can create change directly in the community by speaking up and using their voice. ... Educating the community on the issues they face, standing up for themselves against violence against them, sharing their voice and supporting projects and programs as peer leader and educator (GAF 2013a).

In 2013, we conducted an evaluation of the change theory and the national network. We wanted to evaluate the impact of our work as well as gain insight into the members' perception of the network and future priorities. The evaluation involved a document review, focus groups, interviews, and a survey. The results of this evaluation gave us insight into the life, impact, and possible future of the national network.

The evaluation found that, overall, there was alignment between the outcomes described in GAF's theory of change and those reported in its programs, but there is still work to be done to advance understanding of systems change. How do we measure the ripple effects created when a girls group empowers girls towards community action? It is not as simple as measuring a change in policy. What policy are we trying to change—if any? Systemic change takes time, and we lack traditional metrics and indicators that clearly express change at that level.

It is also unclear whether the network understands itself as becoming more than a community of practice—that is, whether it is emerging as a system of influence (Wheatley and Frieze 2006). During staff focus groups, the team debated whether the network is a system of influence or if it facilitates learning that supports action at a local level among members: "The network is not really a movement; it's a community of practice. It's a place to build relationships, to share and help. But a movement, that means taking action, moving forward and advocating for something, and I don't see the network as doing something like that. I don't see it doing that unless we change the structure" (GAF 2013a).



According to evaluation survey responses, network members overwhelmingly perceive the network to be a community of practice. Respondents replied that they were very satisfied with the network in the following areas: (1) connecting to a community across Canada; (2) sharing financial resources with members; (3) strengthening local girls' programs; (4) fostering the exchange of skills and peer support; and (5) raising awareness of girls' issues by providing information, publications, and resources. These indicators speak to the network's standing as a flourishing community of practice (Wheatley and Frieze 2006). However, looking forward, both members and staff articulate priorities that reflect the transition from community of practice to a community of influence. Priorities include:

Looking at systemic change. Teaching young girls about political systems, not necessarily so that they can go into politics but so that they understand how things work in a capitalist patriarchal system so that they can decide how they want to engage with it.

In five years, the network is a key player in the government consultation on policies that affect girls.

I would like to see the national network be able to respond to changing political contexts. To become a pressure group that influences policy—only with necessary resources.

Policies of immigration & refugee, connections between indigenous and newcomers, stronger stance on tolerance of racism and homophobia.

Where government allocates money especially towards young girls and their future (GAF 2013a).

The evaluation also indicated that members were highly supportive of activities that would enable the network to emerge or strengthen as a system of influence. Examples included strengthening collaboration between researchers and programmers, and building campaigns to effect systems change.

## **Politics of Place: Reflections on the Practice of Learning across Communities**

How do the politics of place play out in the GAF national network, and how do the politics of place strengthen our efforts for systems change? What can we learn about networks influencing change—from the lived experience and dynamics created through a politics of place? As noted above, in theory, networks need diversity in order to effect

systems change while sustaining strong bonds that support trust and reciprocity. What does this look like in practice? The politics of place are alive and key to the engagement of the network given that members are place-based spaces and programs that engage girls on a local level rather than an interconnected web directly engaging girls across the country.

The growing interest in girls' well-being is largely defined by a discourse that is reactionary, panicked, individualistic, and based on protecting the morality of white middle- to upper-class girls (Currie et al. 2009: 33). The network continually reflects critically on the question of *which* girls we are talking about when we talk about girls. GAN is committed to engaging with diverse realities through a network model that breaks down the narrow definitions that society projects onto girls about what it means to be a girl. Racialized girls, Indigenous girls, and newcomer girls are often rendered invisible in the broader societal conversations that take up girl issues. These dominant conversations tend to focus on individualizing issues like body image, self-harm, self-esteem, and confidence. Within these frames, girls are often seen as problems to be fixed rather than agents of change, and broader social contexts are not named. Girls who are situated differently based on class, race, and sexual identity are also held up to dominant social norms that then either erase their experiences or frame these girls as being at risk and in need of intervention. Critical race theory, Indigenous feminism, and an intersectional analysis are examples of frameworks that recenter the dominant discourse and offer tools for the network members to engage the politics of place within the life of the national network. From a practical perspective, this means starting where girls are at, and locating their experiences within broader social and political contexts.

The evaluation revealed that some members experienced barriers to a fuller engagement in the network, namely, insufficient time and money, as well as the problem of physical distance, especially for those living in remote and rural areas. The practical challenges of time, money, space, and meaningful communication have an impact on engagement. Girls' programs and spaces face a constant challenge of underfunding and lack of infrastructure support. For marginalized communities this challenge is exacerbated. Communities organizing with youth-led, informal approaches, or social justice advocacy face challenges in sustaining their work. The politics of place is a constant dynamic in GAN's work, and these tensions are addressed in a number of ways.

The network, as a community of practice and as an emerging community of influence, aims to support girls' empowerment in diverse contexts. GAF has sought to do this in a number of ways, while keeping

in mind the challenges members have reported as potential barriers to engagement.

## **Reflecting on Learning: Creating Conditions to Learn across Difference**

### *Recognizing the Value of a Diverse Network*

Building a diverse network requires intention and commitment. However, we firmly believe that the social conditions affecting girls and women across the country will not change unless they are met with the ingenuity and integrity that a diverse network offers. We have learned through experience that we must consider carefully *who* we engage in the network's leadership. All GAF activities strongly emphasize outreach, and there is a focus on securing funding to subsidize travel to ensure engagement from communities across Canada. Commitment to a diverse network is ongoing, requiring consistent efforts to reach new and emerging groups to understand what is happening at the grassroots level. The national office is considerate of this and has developed criteria to elicit participation from communities based on gaps in representation. We have learned that outreach and relationship-building are constant activities, ones that require evaluation and tracking to ensure that the network is consciously and intentionally diverse.

At the annual national retreat, girls and women come from under-resourced urban and rural areas, Aboriginal communities, large centers, and privileged neighborhoods from across Canada. GAF tries to reach out to girls and young women who are newcomers and racialized, and to communities. Our recent evaluation (Girls Action Foundation 2013a) of the network revealed that these kinds of activities, where diverse practitioners are brought together, result in an enthusiastic sharing of resources, critical dialogue, and practices that then travel back to local communities. Program evaluations from the retreat indicate that these gatherings advanced members' understanding of social justice issues affecting girls and young women. Here are a few examples of what members had to say about the annual national retreat.

I learned a lot about different approaches, and the geographical and socio-cultural forces that shape the ways different people resist. Using what you have, what you know. Being from northern Canada, I can relate, as I was doing work to eradicate oppression before I had any sense of what it meant to go through anti oppression training or what consensus even is.

One girl I talked to quite a bit because she came to my anti-bullying workshop and I got some honest feedback—"I don't know if that would

work with racial violence.” I realized I need to look at different kinds of violence to make my workshops more relevant.

I learned many things about strategies and approaches to girls groups, I went deeper in my reflections of class, gender and especially racial issues, and most of all you gave me all the powerful energy and motivation for my projects.

### *Collaborative Feminist Pedagogy*

The network is a learning ground for creating relationships across differences to move past the identity politics that have challenged movement-building. As our website notes,

[a]n integrated feminist analysis recognizes and takes into account the multiple and intersecting impacts of policies and practices on different groups of women because of their race, class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, religion, culture, refugee or immigrant status, or other status. This framework recognizes that girls’ and women’s experiences of life occur in multiple and compounding spheres. Employing this analysis from a self-reflexive position, the Girls Action approach envisions building solidarities with communities and young women. Only by recognizing the differing locations and varying histories of individuals can we begin to build relationships and mobilize for social change together (n.d.).

The feminism espoused by GAF has evolved in relation to those involved. For example, in the recent evaluation, one member noted that she wanted “to see the national network provide spaces for us to connect and share resources but to do it in a way that supports and recognizes the very specific and complete needs of racialized, indigenous, queer and trans girls/women/people.” This perspective had been voiced before, resulting in changes to workshop content to include sessions on colonialism and its impacts with special attention to indigenous communities, being in and supporting transgendered realities, and working with and for newcomers.

The network has been consistent in its adherence to one of the earliest feminist slogans that the personal is political, and the imperative of its expression in popular education, such as that espoused by Paulo Friere. All of the training activities offered at GAF begin by examining personal experience and knowledge as a basis from which to strategize collective action. The groundwork for collaboration is created at each gathering and training session where participants develop group agreements about ways of acknowledging consent and dissent. We have also learned that setting the stage for constructive collaborative learning has required anti-oppression training for staff, facilitators, and participants.

The training in Amplify and that in Elle often brings people living in very different contexts into proximity with each other. A community in rural Newfoundland can share and learn from girls living in Toronto. A racialized young woman coming from Ottawa might meet a First Nations girl living in Wemindji, Quebec. Through their formal and informal exchanges during the training, over lunch, and during large group activities, they come to discover more about one another and the issues that matter most in their respective communities. They leave with a better sense of one another, a familiarity that has the potential to spark future collaboration. Here are two reflections from Amplify participants:

Because of my experience there I've shifted quite a bit as far as how I address cultural issues in my group. I am a lot more likely to be ... I'm more conscious of creating space for really appropriate and empowering cultural expression.

I am going to change the focus of my girls group to include a broader range of issues around social justice.

Elle evaluations indicate that participants appreciated connecting with other young women from across the country, and many noted that what they learned there would help them to make a difference in their communities. Here are a few of their reflections.

My experience in Elle was indescribable. On a personal level, I rejuvenated my spirit and passion from hearing the incredible stories of all the girls here. The environment was safe to open up and yet to get critical, intellectual feedback when necessary. My vague ideas were brought into a clear vision and I have been given the practical tools/ resources to make a reality.

It was an amazing growing experience that challenged me to think differently, connect with people of various backgrounds and to step outside my comfort zone.

It took my breath away. For once in my life I had a safer space to discuss issues which mattered to me. I had a voice and was actively listened to by those who felt similarly/differently. It is now that I know the definition of home.

### *Shared Leadership*

In traditional models of coalition leadership, consensus building and agreed-upon priorities are primary in collective efforts; in a network model, emergent issues lead the way. GAN adopted this network approach to facilitate learning across difference more strategically. Re-

sponding to the quoted statement from a network member cited earlier and others like it has required workshops and gatherings to accept leadership from people who understand these realities and can teach others about them. This has provided opportunities for leadership in all areas of the organization, from staff to regional leaders, to workshop facilitators.

The network's leadership must represent its participants, and, since it is a living organism, this has meant remaining responsive to the need for new and different leaders over time. For example, in 2008, several network members from northern Canada participated in the national retreat and regional network sessions. During these meetings, these members identified the need to create a northern-specific project to provide a forum for young women in northern communities and to strengthen a network specific to these girls' issues and concerns. This model became a blueprint for further collaborations that focused on building community tools and knowledge specific to racialized girls, immigrant girls, and girls living in rural areas. Face-to-face gatherings of the network have become a hub for collaborative practice, creating generative spaces where new partnerships and projects are born. Organic working groups build national projects that are responsive to diverse needs. National collaborations develop research, as well as community tools and resources by and for racialized girls (*Our Communities, Our Words: Stepping Up for Racialized Girls' Empowerment* (GAF 2009)), northern girls (*Northern Reflections: Looking Back and Moving Forward for Girls Empowerment* (GAF 2008)), First Nations girls (*Indigenous Young Women: Speaking our Truths, Building our Strengths* (Native Youth Sexual Health Network 2011)), rural girls (*Rural Community Action Guide* (GAF 2013b)), and newcomer girls (*The Bridge Guide* (GAF 2013c)).

In 2012, shared leadership meant giving space and resources to facilitators working to address new themes. This resulted in a co-authored publication entitled *Decolonizing Social Justice Work: Stories to Support Organizations, Facilitators, and Youth Working against Oppression* (Sajjani et al. 2012). This, like all of GAF's publications, is available as a free downloadable book on our website for all members and for the public. Girls Action Foundation's role is to support the leadership of community members, to leverage resources to advance this work, and to provide a networked infrastructure in which to implement activities.

### *Emergent Design*

The training offered through GAF aims to respond to the needs and interests of those present while still disseminating the min specs or con-

sistent, core elements of the GAF approach. As noted on the website, “The Girls Action approach is continuously shaped by young women’s input and feedback. A fluid spiral of learning, reflecting, researching, doing, and evaluating informs this work on both organizational and programming levels. We are committed to remaining adaptable and relevant to the changing realities of girls’ and young women’s lives.” While GAF training still provides the basics of popular education, it has evolved to respond to emergent interests and needs. For example, training has included components on being and becoming an ally, trauma-informed programming, and relational and heart-centered approaches to facilitation as an appreciation of the potential of relationships have come more into focus.

### *Getting Comfortable with Tension and Ambiguity*

While not an explicit goal, becoming comfortable with ambiguity and tension underlies GAF’s diverse network. There have been many moments during retreats and other gatherings where mistakes have been made, where it has been necessary to have difficult conversations, and where staff, facilitators, and participants have needed to ask hard questions and remain open to finding a way forward. Evaluations from gatherings are an important space for reflection and they provide constructive feedback. When asked how these gatherings could be strengthened, participants voiced the following strategies.

- Building a common understanding of safety/safe space. Having a process in place to deal with the tension, conflict, and distress that arises.
- Explicitly setting expectations for white participants around silence, observation, learning without intrusion, and giving up power.
- Creating more spaces to talk about oppression, more spaces for us as allies to step back and shut up.
- Fostering more aboriginal and racialized anti-oppression resources.

Sometimes these moments were met with an awareness that we were at the edge of our understanding and needed time to respond. Sometimes they called for an awareness of just how different we are from one another and that coexistence and movement-building is a challenge, but a worthy one. This learning is captured in evaluation feedback expressed by one retreat participant: “I have learned to recognize my privileges; those many things I never thought twice about before. I believe that the reflection, and real discomfort I felt through-

out the retreat, has provided me with the opportunity to ‘look deeper,’ to ‘feel more’ and to appreciate that even though things on the surface appear good and equal and okay, there is a much bigger picture that I am at least aware of now.”

GAN’s gatherings have been important to learning how to mobilize for change. To advance girls’ issues, we need to develop our understanding of them. To build collaborative action, we need to create conditions for learning across difference.

## **Looking Ahead: Opportunities to Influence Systems Change**

As Girls Action continues to work towards systems change, how can we use the practice of learning across difference to influence broader social change? What are the opportunities?

We have explored our reflections and the conditions required to learn and work across difference within a community of practice. There is further work to do to translate what we have learned from our rich and diverse network into influential political advocacy. GAF acts as what Moore and Westley call an “institutional entrepreneur” (2011: 771) noticing emerging patterns; building and brokering relationships, knowledge, and resources; and recharging the network. GAN amplifies and validates the knowledge generated by girls in their local contexts, suggesting that the network may be able to influence other movements by creating opportunities for grassroots learning to be transferred across sectors. Strengthening partnerships between and among researchers and practitioners and building partners in corporate sectors also creates opportunities to share practice, methodology, and analysis on girls and social justice issues. These diversified partnerships could also foster collaborative action on systemic issues, while introducing a feminist lens and structural analysis into influence systems, such as education. Finally, the network can leverage opportunities to reposition and reframe conversations about girls and social justice issues.

## **Looking Ahead: Diversity, Networks, and Systems Change**

Network theory has informed girls’ action practice, creating a framework for working across difference. While diversity in networks is key to their health, there is little research on the practical realities of diversity in social change movement-building. Further research should be done to understand how diverse communities move from practice to



influence. Our hope is that our learning can contribute to a broader conversation about how networks influence systems and the conditions needed to create collaborative learning across difference.

**Stephanie Austin** is a co-founder and Chair of the Board of Directors of Girls Action Foundation. She is an Adjunct professor in Community Psychology at the University of Ottawa, Canada, where she supports students who have an interest in applied social research on equity and health. A current area of focus is the prevention of violence against girls and young women.

**Tatiana Fraser** is co-founder and past Executive Director of Girls Action Foundation. In 2010, she was awarded an Ashoka fellowship and recognized as one of the 100 most influential women in Canada (Canada's Most Powerful Women: Top 100). She currently serves as Vice President for the Carold Institute and Treasurer for Food Secure Canada and sits on the board of directors of Execo. Tatiana is currently a social innovation and leadership consultant and is completing a book project, *Girls Positive*. She is passionate about the ability of networks to influence change, scaling deep while scaling up, and women's role in leadership and social innovation.

**Alyssa Louw** is a Ph.D. student in Community Psychology at the University of Ottawa. Her main research interests include community responses to violence against women and girls, and primary prevention programming. Additionally, she is collaborating on an evaluation of a Girls and Boys Club of Canada program designed to increase graduation among youth at risk of dropping out of high school.

**Nisha Sajnani** is an Associate Professor, and Co-ordinator of the Drama Therapy and Mental Health Counseling M.A. program and senior advisor in the Expressive Therapies Ph.D. program at Lesley University (Cambridge, MA). She is also on faculty with the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma and consultant to the Post Traumatic Stress Center in New Haven, CT. She presents internationally on the role of the arts in/as research and community development. Central to her work is an investigation of the relationship between and among identity, geography, aesthetics, violence, and justice. Her latest book, with David R. Johnson, is entitled *Trauma-informed Drama Therapy: Transforming Clinics, Classrooms, and Communities* (2014). Nisha is the editor-in-chief of *Drama Therapy Review* and on the editorial board of the international

journal, *Arts in Psychotherapy*. She has been the lead facilitator for Girls Action Foundation's national programs since 2003.

## Notes

1. The Girls Action Foundation is a national charitable organization based in Canada, founded in 1995 as a local grassroots girls empowerment program (originally called POWER Camp). The Foundation creates and supports popular education programs for girls and young women, and their mandate is to lead and seed girls' programs across Canada. The organization works to build girls' and young women's skills and confidence, and inspire action to change the world.
2. Girls Action Network is made up of over 350 organizations across Canada that share a vision of girls' empowerment and a desire to advance girls. Facilitated and led by the Girls Action Foundation, the network is a vehicle to scale out girls' programs and to facilitate a community of practice. The purpose of the network is to create a space for practitioners to share skills, build capacity, and advance understanding of the issues facing girls today. The communities represented in the network are varied and they reflect local concerns about the realities faced by girls and young women.

## References

- Berman, Helene, and Yasmin Jiwnani. 2002. *In the Best Interests of the Girl Child: Phase II Report*. London: Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence. [http://ywcanada.ca/data/research\\_docs/00000009.pdf](http://ywcanada.ca/data/research_docs/00000009.pdf).
- Borgatti, Stephen. P., and Pacey C. Foster. 2003. "The Network Paradigm in Organizational Research: A Review and Typology." *Journal of Management* 29, no. 6: 991–1013.
- Christensen, Clay, Heiner Baumann, Rudy Ruggles, and Thomas M. Sadtler. 2006. "Disruptive Innovation for Social Change." *Harvard Business Review* 84, no. 12: 94–101.
- Currie, Dawn, Deirdre M. Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz. 2009. "Girl Power": *Girls Reinventing Girlhood*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Girls Action Foundation. n.d. "Girls Action Foundation Approach: Principles" at website section *How We Act, Reflect, Learn, and Grow*. Montreal: Girls Action Foundation. <http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/en/how-we-act-reflect-learn-and-grow>.
- . 2008. *Northern Reflections: Looking Back and Moving Forward for Girls Empowerment*. Montreal: Girls Action Foundation. <http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/en/northern-reflections-looking-back-and-moving-forward-for-girls-empowerment>.
- . 2009. *Our Communities, Our Words: Stepping Up for Racialized Girls' Empowerment*. Montreal: Girls Action Foundation. <http://girlsactionfoundation>

- .ca/en/our-communities-our-words-stepping-up-for-racialized-girls-empowerment.
- . 2013a. Fraser, Tatiana, Alyssa Louw, and Stephanie Austin. *Strengthening the Network: A Network Evaluation of the Girls' Action Foundation*. Montreal: Girls Action Foundation.
- . 2013b. *Rural Community Action Guide: A Collection of Reflections, Stories and Strategies by Those Working with Girls and Young Women in Rural Communities*. <http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/en/rural-community-action-guide>.
- . 2013c. *The Bridge Guide: A Collection of Reflections, Best Practices, and Resources from Practitioners Who Work with Immigrant Girls and Young Women*. Montreal: Girls Action Foundation. <http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/en/the-bridge-guide>.
- . 2013d. *Theory of Change*. In the authors' possession.
- Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6: 1360–1380.
- Moore, Michele-Lee, and Frances Westley. 2011. "Surmountable Chasms: Networks and Social Innovation for Resilient Systems." *Ecology and Society* 16, no. 1: n.p.. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art5/>.
- Native Youth Sexual Health Network, ed. 2011. *Indigenous Young Women: Speaking Our Truths, Building Our Strengths*. Montreal: Girls Action Foundation. <http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/en/indigenous-young-women-lead-our-stories-our-strengths-our-truths-edited-by-the-native-youth-sexual-health-network>.
- Newman, Lenore L., and Ann Dale. 2005. "Network Structure, Diversity, and Proactive Resilience Building: A Response to Tompkins and Adger." *Ecology and Society* 10, no. 1: n.p.. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol10/iss1/resp2/>.
- Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Sajnani, Nisha, Wariri Mirenja Muhungi, Jessica Yee, Keetha Mercer, Kat Butker, La-Toya Jones, Nathalie Lozano Neira, and Melanie Matining. 2012. *Decolonizing Social Justice Work: Stories to Support Organizations, Facilitators, and Youth Working Against Oppression*. Montreal: Girls Action Foundation. <http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/en/decolonizing-social-justice-work>.
- Wasserman, Stanley, and Katherine Faust. 1994. "Social Network Analysis in the Social and Behavioral Sciences." In *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*, 1–27. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Westley, Frances, Per Olsson, Carl Folke, Thomas Homer-Dixon, Harrie Vredenburg, Derk Loorbach, John Thompson, Måns Nilsson, Eric Lambin, Jan Sendzimir, Banny Banerjee, Victor Galaz, and Sander Leeuw. 2011. "Tipping Toward Sustainability: Emerging Pathways of Transformation." *Ambio: A Journal of the Human Environment* 40, no. 7: 762–780.
- Wheatley, Margaret, and Deborah Frieze. 2006. "Lifecycle of Emergence: Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale." *Resources: Articles*. Provo: The Berkana Institute. [http://berkana.org/berkana\\_articles/lifecycle-of-emergence-using-emergence-to-take-social-innovation-to-scale/](http://berkana.org/berkana_articles/lifecycle-of-emergence-using-emergence-to-take-social-innovation-to-scale/).
- Zimmerman, Brenda, Curt Lindberg, and Paul Plsek. 1998. *Edgework: Lessons from Complexity Science for Health Care Leaders*. Dallas: VHA Inc.