

Arm Candy Activism:
Barriers and Opportunities for Women Leading Social Movement Organizations in Canada

by

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A Major Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

College of Interdisciplinary Studies

Royal Roads University

Abstract

This qualitative study explores and documents the lived experiences of women who are leading social movement organizations in Canada. It gives context to their work within the established sectors and broader movements they are a part of, while highlighting the barriers and opportunities they are currently facing in their work. Their experiences also shed light on the unique barriers that have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the unique opportunities made visible because of the current political climate in Canada and beyond.

Keywords: women, social movements, qualitative

Acknowledgements

I must begin by acknowledging the privilege I have as a settler living and attending school in Victoria, British Columbia, the traditional lands of the Esquimalt and Songhees families.

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the 10 amazing women leaders who participated in this study. Without a willingness to give up their time and energy to speak to me, this work would not exist. I hope I have honoured your experiences.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Zoe MacLeod, for helping me figure out how to give voice to women's experiences and also thank my Royal Roads University counselor, Gemma Fraser, who helped me discover and stick to my path throughout my years at the institution.

I would like to mention the support of my partner, my friends, and my sister who have cheered me on for as long as I can remember. Thank you for being a sounding board throughout my life as it related to this process and for being willing to help read and reread many drafts.

Finally, I would like to recognize the time it has taken me, and the experiences I have been given, throughout the last 15 years I have been working at finishing this degree.

Arm Candy Activism: Barriers and Opportunities for Women Leading Social Movement
Organizations in Canada

The aim of this study is to reveal the lived experiences of women leading social movement organizations in Canada. I conducted one-on-one online interviews with 10 cis-gender women between the ages of 25 and 65, who were leaders of, or within, social movement organizations across Canada. My intention was to learn and understand their experiences, as well as document insights about the barriers and opportunities they face. Since I was interested in gathering data from women leading social movement organizations within the non-profit sector, I initially relied on research that highlighted where the participants found themselves within the context of the other sectors (expanded upon below). This background research gave context and a framework for the voices and experiences of these women, and the dataset provided insights that may have been overlooked or not yet discussed in previous studies. My hope is that this research will reveal the shared barriers these women experienced, and shed light on opportunities to keep working towards solutions to the barriers they, and so many other women, are facing.

Daubanes & Rochet (2016) suggest there is a rise in popularity of social movements within civil society. Due to the publicity and popularity of social causes like combating climate change and promoting racial equality, there is an added benefit to learning about the experiences of women in the forefront of these movements. Allen (2018) spoke to the benefit of hearing women's voices, sharing that when women tell their stories loud and clear, things change for the better. Sharing the experiences from these women is important, not only to add to the current research, but to illuminate *and* challenge the way society has been constructed to benefit white men in power who hold the majority of influence (Feagin & Ducey, 2017).

The title of this study is “Arm Candy Activism: Barriers and Opportunities for Women Leading Social Movement Organizations in Canada”. Arm Candy Activism is a term I coined after 15 years of experience working as a leader for various non-governmental organizations in the non-profit sector. It aims to explain how women, through causes they are leading, are often used by some men in power as adornments - a visual means to gain attention and enhance social status, giving the appearance of supporting social movements without actually doing the necessary internal and external work to fully support the core values of those causes. The motivations of this particular group of men become apparent when they seek to join or support women leaders because the women, organizations, or campaigns are “sexy” enough to boost the man’s political agenda, corporate brand, or non-profit reputation.

One example of women being used as arm candy took place in London in 2015, where certain female Tory Members of Parliament (MPs) expressed complaints when asked to escort the prime minister between events, they spoke out about being used as arm candy for photo opportunities (Perkins, 2015). The article pointed to the disappointment these women had when realizing that fifty years after the suffragette movement, very little had changed. Perkins also noted that the real need was for cultural change, or risk facing another generation of women being used as arm candy (2015). While the Labour party did succeed in making progress in raising its number of female MPs, this article suggested that women in some of the most powerful leadership positions were still being seen as accessories, simply there to adorn these men and the work they were doing.

My working hypothesis is that women leading social movement organizations are perfectly situated to catalyze change in ways that many within government and corporate sectors do not want because it will directly affect their status and privilege. This fear of losing power and

privilege is what leads women and their efforts within these movements to be blocked, hindered, suppressed, or controlled through use as arm candy. Due to current popular public perception of activism, women now have an opportunity to use this momentum to claim more ground than ever, while being backed by considerable support from civil society.

This research is based on qualitative analysis of a study structured around the following question: “What is the lived experience of women who are leading current social movement organizations in Canada?” The data I gathered from their firsthand accounts will add to the current literature findings, as well as spotlight unique leadership barriers and opportunities during the COVID-19 global pandemic. As my literature review will show, there is a gap in research surrounding the experiences of women’s leadership of current social movement organizations, specifically in Canada. Therefore, this study will focus on barriers and opportunities for women in this field.

In creating the framework for understanding the experiences that women in leadership of social movements have, I began by exploring the concept of ‘social movement’. The definition of a social movement is simply “a group of people working together to change a situation they view as unjust or wrong” (Rodgers, 2018, p. 7). Anheier suggests that “social movements begin first with private concerns and private action; as momentum builds the movement may evolve into formal organizations and incorporate hundreds of thousands of individuals and organizations; ultimately, successful social movements may influence government policy by translating private concerns into public issues” (2014, p. 435).

Second, I distinguished a social movement from a social movement organization. Rodgers (2018), states that “a more practical distinction to be made is that between social movements and social movement organizations. It is common to mistakenly refer to a single

social movement organization as a movement, but scholars clarify that a social movement organization is *part of* a larger social movement. For example Greenpeace is one organization involved in the environmental movement” (p. 7).

Third, I situated social movement organizations within the three modern structures that currently exist in society: 1) government, 2) corporate (for-profit), and 3) social (non-profit). Non-profits are “sometimes referred to as the third sector, with government and its agencies of public administration being the first, and the world of business or commerce being the second, it is a sector that has gained more prominence in recent years” (Anheier, 2014, p. 4).

As a movement arises from an unjust situation, it forms and grows to eventually become established and categorized as a non-profit, with or without charitable status. One well known example is Greenpeace, which started as a local grassroots campaign and grew into not only an established Canadian non-profit, but a veritable global actor among international non-governmental organizations (Anheier, 2014). As social movements have become a way to create societal changes, studies regarding their efficacy continue to be necessary. As will be outlined in the Literature Review, currently there is a lack of research regarding the lived experience of women leaders of social movement organizations in Canada. Therefore, my hope is that further research of social movements in Canada can help to uncover the barriers that women within these movements face and spotlight opportunities to create change.

Literature Review

The gap in research specifically surrounding women's leadership experiences in social movement organizations in Canada caused me to broaden my search to include women in leadership in general. Studies throughout the last two decades have shown that “there is a trend toward increased leadership and participation by women in organizations that have been

traditionally dominated by men” (Kaufman & Grace, 2011, p. 6). Yet, the research also revealed that men still hold the power in two out of three of the world’s sectors: government and corporate, while women more commonly hold leadership in the third sector: non-profit (Clause et al., 2013). As of 2017 in America, statistics showed:

White men made up more than 80% of Congress, 78% of state political executives, 75% of state legislators, 84% of mayors of the top 100 cities, 85% of corporate executive officers, 100% of CEO’s of Wall Street firms, 95% of Fortune 500 CEO’s, 73% of tenured professors, 64% of newsroom staffers, 97% of heads of venture capital firms, 90% of tech jobs in Silicon Valley, 97% of owners of television and radio licenses, 87% of police departments and 68% of U.S. Circuit Court Judges. (Feagin & Ducey, 2017, p. 1)

While women find themselves dominating in one of the three sectors (non-profit), they are only pulling ahead of men in terms of numbers of women employed, not women in leadership positions. Statistics show that in the United States, there is a 75 percent majority of women in the non-profit workforce (Guerrero, 2020). Yet, despite the fact that women are leading in numbers of involvement, the number of women in top leadership positions of these non-profits is only 45 percent (Hrabik, 2015). This research suggests that women are still fighting for positions of leadership, even within the third sector where they *are* the majority of those involved. Kaufman and Grace (2011) state that "women in organizations dominated by men can, and frequently do, face numerous gender related expectations and barriers" (p. 7).

Barriers to leadership for women still exist two decades into the 21st century and it is reasonable to assume that gendered stereotypes may be at play, given that the non-profit sector is still frequently associated with more feminine ‘soft’ skills such as charity, giving and nurturing

(Claus, Callahan, & Sandlin, 2013). These 'soft' skills, as opposed to the 'hard' or more masculine skills that came with industrial modernity, have been seen as a threat by some men in opposition to climate change (Anshelm & Hultman, 2014). In further studies regarding the link between femininity and the eco movement, researchers have revealed a 'gender gap' based on apparent stereotypes of the eco movement and how it affects the traditional image of masculinity, and that this connection has led to some men's hesitation to get involved with green behaviours (Brough, Wilkie, Ma, Isaac, & Gal, 2016).

When linked with femininity, a movement is viewed as non-threatening; suggesting that the movements (like the women leading them) are "emotional, weak, dependent, passive, uncompetitive, and unconfident" (Fiske & Stevens, 1993, p. 179). After all "how could a group identified with these attributes be dangerous (or even be taken seriously)...it may also reduce movements' chances for long-term success because these attributions are not associated with power" (Einwohner, Hollander, & Olson, 2000, p. 18). Unfortunately, though linked, the problem runs deeper than some men not wanting to get involved in causes, especially if their masculinity is threatened (Brough et al., 2016). For some men, the underlying fear that women's work and success will change the system and ultimately their own privilege and status, means that they will intentionally or not, become performative in their involvement, essentially giving lip service without real support. This may account for why there are more women involved in the third sector than men, however, the reason there are fewer women leaders can be attributed to the fact that all three sectors are white male dominated or controlled (Feagin & Ducey, 2017).

In reviewing key articles of women in leadership of non-profits, a commonality many of the women shared was the barriers to their leadership. These barriers were the bias and stereotypes about their leadership and the under representation of women in top, high paying,

leadership positions (Born et al., 2018). This under-representation is linked to the idea that women in leadership face a “glass ceiling” (Kaufman & Grace, 2011). Nozawa explains how “research has consistently demonstrated the persistence of the glass ceiling phenomenon, preventing women from being promoted to executive positions and being paid at the same rate as men” (2010, p. 2).

Further examination of the literature uncovered evidence of the systematic oppression of women, and that women who do rise to leadership positions of non-profits are still unable to make the substantial changes needed to disrupt the powerful structures that have been dominated by men (Claus et al., 2013). Subsequently, it makes sense that some of the men who hold the loftiest positions of power are those who are not likely to confront or upset the systems they benefit from. As stated by former Attorney-General of Ontario, Yasir Naqvi in an interview with CBC Radio, "with power comes a lot of pressure to defend the status quo. Because that's how you maintain power. How do we resist that temptation so that we can continue to effect change, is something we also have to remember” (Ayed, 2020, para 19).

Results from a 2013 report titled *Gender and Social Movements* suggest that “recent history has shown that social movements remain a significant force for challenging inequalities and exclusions in society and for proposing new models and visions for more egalitarian and just social, economic and political power relations” (Horne, 2013, p. 10). As this report suggests, the force of social movements (especially the ones run by women) may very well be the necessary checks and balances system for a just society, one that serves to confront the imbalance of power of male dominated sectors by continually calling out inequities.

Methodology

The overall goal in conducting this research was to be able to answer the following question: “What is the lived experience of women in Canada who are leading current social movement organizations?” I chose an interview method with the intention of bringing women’s experiences to the forefront of the conversation. Epistemologically, this methodology is useful in gathering firsthand accounts which can help broaden the scope of literature findings. I committed to working within the critical theory paradigm, collecting multiple women’s stories from various movements with the intent to try to transform the situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), specifically in this case revealing the barriers that women in leadership of social movement organizations in Canada face.

Participants

Ten cis-gender women participated in interviews. I did not intentionally exclude non-binary or transwomen, but this result came from the lack of any self-identified persons (or my knowledge of there being such persons) in leadership of any established social movement organizations in Canada. The women were between the ages of 25 and 65 who were leading current social movement organizations across Canada. I intentionally chose a variety of ages because I wanted to include all five generations of women who coexist in the workplace. I also wanted to highlight the intergenerational experiences of women in leadership, giving voice to values and perspectives that may be different from each other (Peterson, 2020).

Table 1

Participant Professional Information

Participants	Role	Years in Current Role	Years in Social Justice Work	*Classification of Organization
P1	Executive Director	19	23	Social Services Charity

P2	Chief Executive Officer	2	30	Grant Making Foundation
P3	Executive Director	2	13	Advocacy Non-Profit
P4	Head Campaigner	10	16	Environmental Non-Profit
P5	Manager	4	5	Environmental Charity
P6	President	1	6	Environmental Charity
P7	Executive Director	1	39	Advocacy Non-Profit
P8	Executive Director	2	19	Environmental Non-Profit
P9	Manager	2	6	Environmental Non-Profit
P10	Executive Director	5	11	Environmental Non-Profit

*Classified by primary area of activity according to the International Classification of Non-profit Organizations (ICNPO). It is the classification system recommended in the United Nations (UN) Handbook on Non-profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts, 2003.

Table 1 shows that participants represented a wide range of experience levels from working in social movement organizations for 4 years to 39 years consecutively, to working in their current roles from 1 to 19 years. The category or classification of their organizations varied as well as the field in which they worked: social, political, and environmental. The main criterion was that they had experiences leading social movement organizations in Canada.

Eight of the ten participants I recruited had either worked with me directly or had been

known contemporaries or colleagues in previous careers. I was also introduced to two participants via personal networking. I reached out to all recruits directly via email or Messenger to inquire about their interest in this research.

Procedure

Going into this study, I acknowledged the bias behind my intention to ask the question I set out to answer. The bias I brought to this project came out of my own experiences as a leader of social movement organizations. As I was aware of this bias, I worked hard to do some reflection beforehand. Josselson (2013) suggests that “it is important to reflect on your orientation to the whole process. The ideal structure of the interview is a keen awareness that the participant is the expert here” (p. 28). As a result of my internal reflections, I structured my interview questions in such a way that did not reflect my opinions on the issue, either positively or negatively.

Ethical Considerations

My research was guided and approved by the Research Ethics Board at Royal Roads University. I obtained written and informed consent from each individual participating in my study. I used plain and accessible language in these interviews and in all materials presented beforehand. In the consent form, I outlined any potential risks or perceived benefits to the individual participants or their organizations.

Within qualitative research, where this method of interviewing is used, there is a need for interpersonal trust (Von Unger, 2016). Therefore, I stressed that the interviews and stories collected would remain anonymous to maintain privacy and confidentiality. I also outlined that participants may withdraw from the study at any point, for any reason, and that their interviews would be removed from the study at their request.

Data Collection

I conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 10 participants leading social movement organizations across Canada. Because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, I conducted these interviews online via Zoom video conferencing. Each interview was approximately 60-90 minutes in length. Due to time constraints of the participant's schedules, I did not schedule follow-up interviews, instead asking clarifying questions over email. I conducted the interviews over a three-month timeframe. Each interview was recorded with permission, saved directly to my personal computer, and stored on an external hard drive. Subsequent to each interview, and before I began the next interview, I listened to each recording, transcribed it, and noted comments in the margins where themes emerged.

Because I knew the majority of the interviewees, I followed a structured format that would intentionally show that I was "serious in purpose, but in a friendly and comfortable way" (Josselson, 2013, p. 61). Each interviewee had received a list of the same questions along with the consent forms I sent out ahead of time, so we were able to commence the interviews straightaway. Some of the questions I asked were introductory in nature, such as:

- What would you say is the overall mission of your movement or organization?
- What is the overall goal you are trying to accomplish?
- Can you share with me how you came to lead this movement or organization?
- What were the factors that led you to filling this role?

From there, I moved into deeper probing questions that focused on the barriers and opportunities the participants may have faced or are currently facing in leading their organizations.

The majority of the interviews were structured because of time constraints or not wanting personal relationships to get us off track. In doing so, I was able to stay fully in the present

moment, not focusing on what I would say next. Josselson (2013) notes this is key in practicing empathic listening and empathetic responsiveness. I was also able to limit any interruptions or interjections, only doing so to raise points of clarification. Because I knew the majority of the participants, I went into each interview expecting honesty and vulnerability from them as they shared their experiences.

Data Analysis

I began analyzing the collected data by reviewing each recorded interview numerous times. I decided to transcribe the materials myself rather than using the transcription service offered by Zoom or the services of a professional transcriptionist. This method offered an additional layer of security for the stories presented by my participants. Each interview took approximately 10 hours to transcribe orthographically. I reproduced all spoken words and sounds, including every hesitation, false start, or cut-off. After reading my initial transcriptions, I reviewed each interview again in order to make edits “for brevity, removing any words or clauses that are not essential for understanding the overall meaning of a data extract” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 60).

During the interviews, multiple patterns emerged from the data set. Therefore, I chose to do Thematic Analysis (TA) to focus on uncovering the meaning behind the similarities of the participants' experiences. TA is “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Through focusing on meaning across a data set, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). As I familiarized myself with the data through this iterative process, I assigned preliminary colour codes in order to describe the content. I then

searched for patterns or themes in my codes across the 10 interviews. Finally, I reviewed, defined, and named each of the themes and sub-themes.

Results

Going into the interviews I had a unified theme that I wanted to explore: the barriers and opportunities to women's leadership of social movement organizations. After conducting the thematic analysis of the interviews, I separated barriers and opportunities into separate themes. I then discovered one sub theme emerging from each main theme. These sub themes are as follows: attitudes or approaches towards women's leadership (as a sub theme of barriers), and key insights (as a sub theme of opportunities). Along with these newly positioned sub themes, a third main theme arose from the data set - Leading during COVID-19. This third main theme arose because of the specific point in time that the interviews were taking place (2020-2021). This theme was important to highlight as it explored women's experiences leading their organizations during COVID-19 and it highlighted both a unique barrier and opportunity.

Barriers

When asked about barriers to their leadership, participants provided the following five examples:

Patriarchy

The first barrier highlighted by the participants was patriarchy. Ten out of ten participants spoke to issues related to working within the patriarchy and male dominated spaces. Other barriers related to patriarchy that participants named as secondary (but still worth noting) were gender biases, sexism, misogyny, and toxic masculinity. Gilligan and Snider (2018) define patriarchy as a structure that exists in culture as a set of rules and values that specify how men and women should act and be in the world. They explain it as a hierarchy, framework or lens that

leads us to see human capacities as either “masculine” or “feminine” with an emphasis and privilege on centering and upholding the masculine. Gilligan and Snider go on to state that “we recognize that there are complex social and political forces which can account for the persistence of patriarchy. Some people benefit from its institutional and economic arrangements and have a collective interest in maintaining them” (2018, p.4).

Participant 2 explained an experience she had:

I only stayed at *[organization]* for three and a half years and my intention was to stay for six, but the patriarchy nearly killed me. I came in there and I shifted a lot of power away from this cabal of men that had been running the organization for a very long time. I was the first female CEO, and these guys had been there for a very long time, and they kind of controlled everything. And so, I let go of some of them. I shifted some of them into different roles. I pushed a lot of women forward. I brought in an explicit women’s rights agenda, and I wasn’t prepared for how mean the fight was going to be. Like the knives came out for me, and at every turn they were trying to undermine my ability to make change happen.

Imposter Syndrome

The second barrier highlighted by the participants was imposter syndrome. Eight out of ten participants spoke of having had or still currently having imposter syndrome and dealing with anxiety and insecurities about their leadership abilities in their role. Mullangi and Jagsi (2019) define imposter syndrome as a psychological term that refers to a pattern of behaviour wherein people (even those with adequate external evidence of success) doubt their abilities and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud. They give examples of women who have publicly

attributed their accomplishments to luck or good timing instead of merit, each voicing fears that they had simply duped others with an illusion of competence.

Participant 5 shared her experience with imposter syndrome:

When I was younger, I definitely had a lot of imposter syndrome and I doubted myself a lot...always feeling like I'm not good enough. And I'd walk out of any type of presentation, any event, anything. And I've always been so hard on myself, to the point where it was just so hard on my mental health.

Ageism

The third barrier highlighted by the participants was ageism. Six out of ten participants spoke to the theme of ageism and associated stereotypes. They spoke of feeling like they were “too young” or “too old” to be doing the work they were doing, or being treated as such. In 1969, Robert Butler defined the term ageism as “prejudice by one age group toward other age groups” (Butler, 1969, p. 243). The participants that mentioned ageism as a barrier spoke to negative experiences of being patronized or dismissed at different stages of their careers. Either they mentioned having to prove their competencies early on because of their young age or prove their wealth of experiences later on, in order to be taken seriously or included in the spaces they found themselves.

Participant 7 shared her experience with ageism saying, “I've been in rooms where the language that's being used by millennials is very exclusive. You have to use their words or you're not seen to have an analysis”.

Organizational Change Management

The fourth barrier highlighted by the participants was organizational change management. Five out of ten participants spoke of organizational change management and

having to carry the administrative burden of inheriting dysfunctional organizations.

Organizational Change Management, according to Harvard Business School, is “the method of leveraging change to bring about a successful resolution, and it typically includes three major phases: Preparation, implementation, and follow-through” (Stobierski, 2020, para. 5). According to Stobierski (2020) the need for management is spurred by changes such as new leadership at the helm of the company or shifts in the organizational team structure. Half of the interviewees spoke of their experiences stepping into leadership roles of organizations that were in disarray, either from overt mismanagement or because of compiling administrative tasks being overlooked or under prioritized by previous male management or boards.

Participant 3 shared her experience of stepping into her new leadership position at her organization:

When I got in there it was clear that the first thing I needed to do was not ‘oh what can *[organization]* do in the world’, it was more like, ‘okay how do we change the DNA of this organization?’ So that over time, maybe not even until after I leave, the DNA work will have some ripple out impact effects of us being a much more substantive campaigning force...I’m just starting to get to the core mission if I’m being really honest...easily that first year felt like not only dismantling barriers, but fixing messes that I inherited. So it was hard to get to the core mission when the foundations of the organization needed so much work...I was just trying to secure it and build resiliency before we could even get into core mission...I was in a lot of crisis management and fixing of messes versus being able to build anything.

Overwork Culture

The fifth barrier highlighted by the participants was overwork culture. Five out of ten

participants spoke of burnout and overwork culture. According to Willgoss (2020), overwork culture is defined as: a normalized working pattern of behaviour where employees end up working longer days, or hours, in order to manage their prospective workloads. He noted this is likely due to the fact that “many do not have access to the financial and management resources they need. Organizations pointed to a lack of long-term funding as the biggest problem they face in managing staff time” (Willgoss, 2020, para. 6). Overwork culture is not unique to the non-profit sector or to social movement organizations, however, interviewees addressing this barrier spoke of how this ingrained mentality is detrimental to the success of their individual campaigns, the health of their overall organizations, and the longevity of the movement at large.

Participant 8 spoke to the pervasiveness and acceptance of overwork culture:

That the culture of overwork is toxic and unproductive and bad for many reasons. But actually what I was reflecting on was that it did help me get to where I am now. I was totally in it, and bought into it, and worked like crazy for many many years. And I do think it's a factor. I do think, reflecting back within the culture of the organization that I was working for, that if I hadn't been so work focused and had the ability in my life and lifestyle at the time to work so much, I probably wouldn't be in the position I am now...the idea that mission driven work ought to be your top priority because it's so important, it's more important than anything else. That idea plus the overwork stuff which is connected is so pervasive, and it's just unquestionable.

A few of the less frequently mentioned barriers brought up but worth noting were socioeconomic statuses in the participants' upbringings, lack of resources in their organization (including funding or capacity), lack of opportunity for advancement, pay gap, and lack of support or role models.

Attitudes or Approaches

The underlying sub theme to the five key barriers were the attitudes or approaches to the participants' leadership by some of their male colleagues. When asked about the attitudes or approaches to their leadership from male colleagues, either inside their organizations or within the broader movement, the interviewees noted the following three examples:

Leadership Traits

The first attitude or approach highlighted by the participants was leadership traits. Six out of ten women spoke of how their personalities either conflicted or complimented stereotypical male leadership styles. Revealing how they were either initially accepted because of leadership traits they possessed that aligned with a traditional androcentric standard of leadership or they had trouble being accepted or respected by male colleagues because they did not possess these standard leadership styles. Since the 1970's, gender stereotyping and leadership traits have been researched thoroughly (Coder and Spiller, 2013). Literature has shown that tendencies to assign gender to leadership traits has resulted in the propensity to perpetuate stereotypes. Generally, male-dominated decision-making approaches have been described as being quick, action oriented, and analytical. Whereas female-oriented decision-making has been typically described as premeditated, taking time to familiarize themselves with each aspect of the situation before a decision is made (Alimo-Metcalf, 2010).

When asked about the attitudes or approaches to her leadership, Participant 4 responded, "I think because of my personality I'm more blunt, or I have a thick skin, or I like to joke around, or I swear a lot. I think these things made me relatable for male dude colleagues".

In contrast, Participant 8 reflected back on an experience of receiving unsolicited advice from a male colleague regarding her leadership being not masculine enough:

When I was in my first management role, I was told very specifically by a male colleague, ‘this is what you need to do to be taken seriously as a leader’. Basically it was like ‘be more controlling and be more decisive’. But I don’t think it really meant decisive. I think it meant ‘be less consultative, be more controlling, and tell people what to do more, put your foot down to establish your authority’...that was very explicit, but I think that type of feedback is given and received all the time in all sorts of ways, especially by women approaching leadership.

Tone Policing

The second attitude or approach highlighted by the participants was tone policing. Five out of ten participants spoke specifically of how they have adapted over time to repress or *tone police* themselves, especially when dealing with the attitudes or approaches to their leadership from certain male colleagues. Tone policing is defined as “a conversational tactic that dismisses the ideas being communicated when they are perceived to be delivered in an angry, frustrated, sad, fearful, or otherwise emotionally charged manner” (Dictionary.com LLC, n.d.).

Tone policing may seem inconsequential to some, but it has a significant impact on not only the women who experience it, but on the specific points they are trying to make. The author of *Why Are the Tone Police Only Called on Women?* shares “we’re told to simply ignore the comments, but these comments constantly derail our points. To boil our arguments and insight down to meaningless anger is a form of censorship, and it trivializes the significance of our lived experiences” (Shafi, 2015, para 5).

Participant 9 spoke of her experiences with having to police herself, “there is constant tone policing of yourself too that is expected, and just thinking how as a woman you come off.

And that could be in things like in media, being told by your communications colleagues that you need to smile more, when they don't say that to the men".

Participant 3 spoke to how she deals with the attitudes and approaches to her leadership from male colleagues:

I think we get trained...to repress in the moment. Luckily there are other women that I can at least get catharsis with...because it helps to have an affirming voice, to be like 'you're not crazy, this is definitely crazy what they're doing right now'. So I think one of the coping mechanisms is to check with somebody else to get some affirmation of the experience that you're having. And then the other thing, this is new for me, but I am increasingly calling it out...I'm not letting this go by because it's an excellent case for all the subtle ways that men do harm in spaces that they're never held accountable for.

Bullying

The third attitude or approach highlighted by the participants was bullying. Five out of ten participants spoke about their own experiences being dismissed, criticized, patronized, bullied, harassed, or assaulted within their organization, or within the larger movement. They also mentioned witnessing these same things happening to other women. "There are still some people who are uncomfortable with women leaders and want to make sure to let them know that while the woman may be the boss, they are not really running the show...They may use put-down tactics in public forums to make the leader look bad in front of others" (Russell, 2019, para 3).

Participant 10 shared a bullying experience she had publicly:

I got bullied on stage by a male colleague who was monitoring a panel right before the lockdown last year. And a bunch of people in the audience came up to me afterward and

were like ‘we really noticed you getting bullied’, but did anyone talk to that guy about it? I don’t think so. Did the organizers who heard about it happening talk to that guy about it? No. So there’s still that sort of thing happening with some regularity and it’s a bad feeling.

Opportunities

Since my goal in this study was to also research opportunities (along with barriers) for women leading social movement organizations, I made sure to focus a good portion of my interview towards asking questions that I hoped would draw out positive discussion. The participants, many having just shared with me very hard (and at times traumatizing) experiences, were keen to share their ideas of what they were working on within themselves and within their organizations in order to better their lives and the lives of those they were working with. Each participant cited opportunities in the following five areas:

Finding Solutions

The first opportunity highlighted by the participants was finding solutions. Nine out of ten participants spoke of the opportunity women have to continue challenging systems in place and push for solutions. The author of *Meet 15 Women Leading the Fight Against Climate Change* states that “given their position on the front line of the climate-change battle, women are uniquely situated to be agents of change—to help find ways to mitigate the causes of global warming and to adapt to its impacts on the ground. This reality was recognized by the Paris Agreement, which specifically included the global need to further empower women in climate decision-making” (Meet 15 Women Leading the Fight Against Climate Change, 2019, para 2).

Participant 4 spoke of the opportunity for women in finding solutions:

I just see women ploughing forward with solutions. I mean yeah, we're still up against the male dominated corporate sector, but increasingly the sustainability people that I deal with at all the big corporations are women. And so, that's a whole other thing of how the sustainability roles often don't have a lot of power within the company, no shock there. But the point is that I see it growing, I know there's still so many fucking barriers, but I see it as there is a huge movement of women that are pushing the solutions that we need.

Collaboration

The second opportunity highlighted by the participants was collaboration. Eight out of ten participants mentioned working to unify and collaborate within and across larger movements as a key opportunity. "In recent years, nonprofit organizations are increasingly forming alliances, partnerships, and collaborations both within and across sectors to achieve important public purposes" (Guo & Acar, 2005, p. 340).

Participant 1 talked about the importance of building partnerships:

Instead of feeling bad that we can't do everything, where are the partnerships that link us with those who have slightly different mandates and missions than we do? So that in our shared work, it is a very comprehensive vision of all that needs to be done.

Leadership Style

The third opportunity highlighted by the participants was leadership style. Eight out of ten participants spoke about the opportunities for women to lean into and lead out of leadership styles that are unique to women. Findings of a US study of how female and male managers describe their preferred leadership style (Rosener, 1990) showed that:

- Women are more likely than men to use "transformational leadership" – motivating others by transforming their individual self-interest into the goals of the group.

- Women use “interactive leadership” styles by encouraging participation, sharing power and information, enhancing peoples’ self-worth.
- Women are much more likely than men to ascribe their power to interpersonal skills or personal contacts rather than to organizational stature.
- Women as leaders believe that people perform best when they feel good about themselves and their work, and they try to create situations that contribute to that feeling.

Rosener found that “in describing nearly every aspect of management, the women made reference to trying to make people feel part of the organization from setting performance goals to determining strategy” (Rosener, 1990, p. 120). Most of the participants were very aware that there were stereotypes about their leadership and that this was not a new concept for them. However, many participants were not only confident enough to disregard the stereotypes in complete acceptance of their leadership style, but also clearly expressed that the world needs this type of leadership moving forward.

Participant 2 articulated the need for feminine leadership styles:

Everywhere I go I see women knocking it out of the park, in terms of what this moment is calling for. In terms of leadership requiring managing complexity, being adaptive, being collaborative, truly understanding that we are all part of nature and hold a stake in its future, working across diversities and bringing authenticity, and bringing love and care into the work. I mean all of those things are part of the feminine whether they’re female, but they are part of the feminine. So women have greater access to the feminine. And so, it’s what the world is going to be calling on more and more and more is female leadership.

Mentoring

The fourth opportunity highlighted by the participants was mentoring. Seven out of ten participants spoke about the opportunity to make space for, invest in, mentor, and support young women who are coming into activism. A global study on women as mentors found that these opportunities are exactly what is needed, stating that “according to our findings, women have trouble finding other women to be mentors even though there are willing mentors out there... There is a shortage of senior-level women to look to for mentoring. Women in top leadership positions must be courageous and make themselves available as mentors in order to ensure mentoring happens. Women need to advertise their willingness to mentor” (Neal et al., n.d., p. 12).

Participant 6 spoke freely about her desire to fulfill a mentoring role:

I just want to invest my time in women and support women in leadership roles and it’s something I’m really passionate about. And I don’t know whether that’s considered a bias or whether it’s just considered an observation over the years, of seeing people not getting the same role, seeing my friends not getting the same roles, as men.

Embodying Values

The fifth opportunity highlighted by the participants was finding embodying values. Five out of ten participants noted the opportunity for them as female leaders to continue working to embody and live out their organization's values. Kappel (2018) speaks to leaders, telling them that to create their companies core values, they should think about their own core values.

Participant 8 described her leadership position and how she committed to embodying core values into her role:

The opportunity for *[organization]* is for us to live and embody our values as an organization more than we have and more than we do. And also to truly value everyone

and to be an organization where everyone is welcomed in, is included, and can really thrive. That is what I think about the most because I think it is the greatest opportunity for our organization to also succeed in what we are trying to do.

Key Insights

A sub theme to opportunities was the key insights that the participants had about themselves and the systems they work within, specifically in context of what opportunities there were for their leadership. Each interviewee was asked to reflect on what they had learned over their years doing social justice work. Some participants spoke to internal realizations and what they have learned about themselves, while others spoke to the existing external structures that they are up against and what they have learned about the systems and systemic issues that are still at play. Some participants addressed both. Below are the three internal insights and one external insight the participants spoke of.

Internal Insights

Finding Support. The first internal insight highlighted by the participants was finding support. Eight out of ten participants spoke specifically about learning that they needed to find support in their journey of leadership, whether that was finding a mentor, coach, therapist, or trusted group of friends to deliberate with. Though all were aware of this need, some admitted to not making it a priority to reach out and ask for support. *A Global Study of Businesswomen and Mentoring*, revealed that though women are making themselves available to mentor others, they are not seeking out mentorship opportunities for themselves. “This is disappointing as there are many sources pointing out how critical having a mentor is for growth and development. An overwhelming 63 percent of women in our study reported that they have never had a formal mentor” (Neal et al., n.d., p. 5).

Participant 5 shared the reason she believes that women do not reach out:

I think sometimes people in general hold back because you're kind of taught to do that in our system unfortunately. It's like you're supposed to deal with your individual woes and not lean on people so heavily, because you should be able to figure it out.

Practising Self-Care. The second internal insight highlighted by the participants was practising self-care. Five out of ten participants mentioned learning the need to practice self-care and instill boundaries, which, according to Urban (2020), is the number one strategy for successful leaders.

Participant 5 shared her experience with saying no:

I think I've gotten a little bit better but I still need some work to not be a people pleaser, which I think women are kind of taught to be. It's like 'you should be a people pleaser, you should be nice. You should do all these nice things that are expected of you'. When really it's like, 'you need to learn how to say no', especially in this field. You need to learn how to say no or you're going to be stressed out.

Leading with Vulnerability. The third internal insight highlighted by the participants was leading with vulnerability. Five out of ten participants spoke of learning the need for leading with compassion, empathy, and vulnerability. A report on inclusive behaviours and practices listed vulnerability in the top three ways to foster inclusive leadership. This report stated that organizations should, "model bringing one's whole self to work and give permission for and encourage others to do so. Show up authentically. Be vulnerable" (Ferdman et al., 2009, p. 19).

Participant 2 spoke to what she learned when practicing vulnerability within her role:

I came in with the same open heartedness and true belief in authenticity and transparency and allowing people to bring one's emotions into the role. And that showing your

vulnerability is a strength. I brought that in and to those boys they were just like ‘what a weak leader’, ‘so indecisive’, because I was so consultative...so, [with] a style of leadership that is more collaborative, consultative, transparent, expressing vulnerability, you will be judged.

External Insight

Systems Change. When asked about external insights, one topic was pervasive - the need for systems change. Here, six out of ten participants spoke directly to systemic barriers and the need for change either within them, or for a complete overhaul of the way things are currently done. Systems change and the need for it is described by Evans and Wharton, who state: “systems change is about addressing the root causes of social problems, which are often intractable and embedded in networks of cause and effect. It is an intentional process designed to fundamentally alter the components and structures that cause the system to behave in a certain way” (Evans & Wharton, n.d., para 1). Furthermore, Evans and Wharton explain that “unless we attempt to deal with the causes of social problems, we will only be mitigating the consequences of malfunctioning systems, or even providing inadvertent cover for their failure—we will not create the change we want to see” (Evans & Wharton, n.d., para 2).

Participant 10 spoke of how her work was pushing for transformational change in the world:

Our society is built on a series of structural elements that have misogyny, white supremacy, colonial structures of cultural and resource extractive-ism, and the externalization of environmental harm. The very social and economic foundations of our society have those things baked into them...and at some point in my teens I knew that at a really core emotional level. And I think the arc of my career so far has been one of

wanting to push a lot of the work I do, and the spaces in which I work, into learning that. And really trying to build these connections between these different struggles, because at the root of it, it's the same struggle. It's the struggle to shift those broken foundations and to rebuild. And so there's been learning for me in that, and I think the environmental movement is still learning it. It's been a really interesting time in the last few years of cracking that open in the environmental movement and in this past year especially. I think some of us are really on board with the understanding that our work has to live at the systems level, like at that scale of structural transformation, in order to really address the root cause of climate change and these other injustices and inequities.

Participant 8 reflected on how deeply these issues are ingrained in the way she not only views the world, but in how she views herself:

I think with making systems change, we need to examine ourselves in terms of what we've internalized, our own growth and learning, but also listen to some different visions of what the world could be and what our organizations and movements could be. Because I think those ideas are always there, but they're just not always taken up.

Leading During COVID-19

A third main theme, which emerged during my analysis of the data, was women's experiences leading organizations during the COVID-19 global pandemic. This unique area of focus created an additional barrier and opportunity outlined below.

Unique Barrier - Parenting and Childcare. A unique barrier that emerged from the data set involved parenting and childcare. This was brought up in seven out of ten interviews, either by leaders who were mothers or by leaders who have witnessed the plight of mothers (especially single mothers) within their organizations. This barrier is not necessarily new to women in the

workforce, but had been exacerbated during COVID-19. Research by Ipsos for UN Women in 16 countries revealed that before COVID-19, the average time spent on childcare by women was approximately 26 hours per week. Since the pandemic started in 2019, women spend approximately 31 hours, which adds an average of 5.2 hours per week for childcare, totaling 30 plus hours solely on childcare. This is comparative to women working an additional full-time job per week (“Who’s Time To Care?,” n.d.). Participant 4 shared that during COVID-19 she had witnessed how “the burden disproportionately often falls on the woman to deal with the kid if both parents work from home”.

A 2020 study entitled *Women in the Workplace*, highlighted that during COVID-19, mothers that are part of a dual career couple are twice as likely as fathers in a dual career couple to spend five or more hours a day on chores. The study also stressed an even greater struggle for single mothers who have to carry the entire burden of housework and childcare, as well as having to deal with financial insecurities (Coury et al., 2020). The authors of the study went on to highlight how mothers, more than fathers, are the ones having to face the decision to downshift their careers or leave the workforce altogether. “Among mothers who are thinking about downshifting or leaving, a majority cite childcare responsibilities as a primary reason” (Coury et al., 2020, para 14).

The study goes on to share additional data from women in senior leadership positions, stating how the women at this level are significantly more likely to feel burned out than a man who is at the same level of leadership. The women in these positions “are 1.5 times more likely than senior-level men to think about downshifting their role or leaving the workforce because of COVID-19. Almost three in four cite burnout as a main reason” (Coury et al., 2020, para 16).

Participant 8 spoke to the dilemma she has experienced and witnessed in balancing motherhood with a career:

The expectation that work is your top priority if you're in a leadership role...[is] just not compatible with supporting people with parenting responsibilities to be in these roles.

And I think that's a super active thing and COVID has exasperated it like crazy. And so that's when so many women and so many moms have left the workforces and I think that single moms are the top group that have left the workforce during COVID or lost their jobs. And I think that in our movement, because it's mission driven and the work we're trying to do is so important and critical, it's really hard to break away from the idea that everyone should be prioritizing it fully and working all the time. It's like if you say that, then you don't think the work is so important, or you're not as committed, or it's such an identity thing. It's just all tangled up.

Unique Opportunity - Racial Justice. A unique opportunity emerged from the dataset when six out of ten participants spoke of the international push for racial justice throughout 2020. What arose during this time was recognition of the need to diversify their organizations and prioritize equity, diversity, and inclusion. The 2020 *Women in the Workplace* report noted that in order for the success of a company's commitment to diversity and inclusion, there needs to be an intersectional approach to their diversity efforts. For example, companies or organizations who typically either focus on race *or* gender, often result in women of colour being overlooked simply because the company or organization already had *a woman* filling the role. "In contrast, when companies set goals and track outcomes by gender and race combined, they can more clearly see how Black women and other women of colour are progressing. For example, if companies evaluate access to formal mentorship, sponsorship, and management

training this way, Black women are more likely to get equal access to these critical opportunities” (Coury et al., 2020, para 28).

Participant 3 spoke to the culminating point of racial protests as a result of George Floyd’s death (Dreyer, B. et al., 2020) and the effect that it had on her leadership:

The confluence of the pandemic and then the flashpoint of Black Lives Matter last year, we were already in a process of *[organization]* doing training’s around dismantling white dominant culture in organizations, and we’re still on that journey. And so we’re also taking it upon ourselves now to start holding other organizations accountable...there’s that extra labour that’s happening as well. So, I end up in a lot of ally spaces where I’m kind of like the shrill angry woman because I’m having to hold people accountable that aren’t holding themselves accountable.

Discussion

The data from this study reveals that women leading social movement organizations in Canada share numerous commonalities. Though these women differ in age, location, socioeconomic status, career experience, leadership styles, and types of organizations they are leading, their interviews show that much of their experiences with the barriers they face are the same. Similarly, their outlooks of the opportunities (finding solutions, collaborating, leaning into their unique leadership styles, mentoring, embodying values, finding support, practicing self-care, leading with vulnerability, pushing for systems change, and racial justice) are also united.

Closer examination of the meta narrative provided by the participants’ accounts reveal an overarching obstacle is in play against them and their work: specifically patriarchy. In light of the data, each barrier *to* women’s leadership, and attitude and approach *toward* their leadership, can be tied to the persistence of patriarchy within society (Gilligan & Snider, 2018). Furthermore,

every opportunity brought forth suggests the resilience and resistance these women demonstrate in standing against the patriarchy (as it presents itself within their organizations and their movements). It also demonstrates how they are pushing beyond male dominant attitudes and behaviours, to fighting for systems change that would benefit us all.

An interesting effect of the patriarchy to emerge from the participant's experiences, is how each woman admitted to being contextualized by some men inside (or outside) their organizations, specifically, how they had been treated as either a mother figure, daughter figure, or partner figure. Similarly, their experiences can be compared to the popular phrase "she's someone's mother, sister, daughter" when trying to empathize with rape victims (Mei, 2016). This internalized way of contextualizing women is highly problematic because it positions a woman's worth solely in relationship to the man, and it is so ingrained that it is often done subconsciously (Madsen, n.d.). Women who are viewed as objects end up being *used* as objects, leading to the treatment of women as arm candy. Participants shared a number of relevant comments.

Mother Figure Example

P1: I get weird projections of mommy issues...men project whatever stuff they haven't worked out with their mother in expectation of how I will relate and react to them. And it requires a great deal of patience and generosity on my part.

Daughter Figure Example

P4: When I came into the campaigner role I was pretty young...also, when I came in we were doing a lot of corporate campaigning, and so basically it was me in my mid-twenties meeting with 50 year old corporates, usually males, sometimes older than that...but there was definitely a dynamic I would say, it was almost like corporate males did a paternal

thing with me...I don't know how to describe it other than that way, it was like a paternal vibe.

Partner Figure Example

P5: Sometimes I'll notice I'll be favoured, and maybe I'm just out to lunch, and I'm a narcissist but...I'll find that there have been men in organizations, typically older, who have been wanting to schedule regular meetings and regular calls and really want to keep up. And I think they truly love [*organization*] and it's all super well intentioned, but I'm like why do they really love me? This one guy...he's like, 'I think you're a star, I want to have you on all the time'. And he's texting me, which is totally fine, that's all good. And then one day he's like, 'Zoom chat or phone?' and I was like, 'you know what phone would be good because I'm kind of Zoomed out'. And he was like 'oh I kind of wanted to video' and I was like, 'okay' and he was like, 'yeah I find it better for connecting'. And it could totally just be that, but I just got a vibe from it. I was like, 'I feel like you like me or something?' But maybe I'm just being a narcissist...I think it's been fair, but I just sometimes wonder that if I had a different identity would they have wanted to meet so frequently, always by video, having been given so much attention to the organization via through me? But again, maybe I'm being conceited, which is totally possible.

Throughout history, women have conformed in the face of patriarchy and the gender biases that exist towards them, typically keeping their heads down and playing by the rules (Kay & Shipman, 2014). As the author of *Patriarchy and Inequality* states:

Women play a number of important roles in patriarchal culture, though those roles often vary with race, class, and other "differences." Perhaps most basic is the use of women and femininity to define men and masculinity. Men are men to the extent they are not

women: masculine, independent, invulnerable, tough, strong, aggressive, powerful, commanding, in control, rational, and non-emotional. "Real women" (that is, middle- or upper-middle-class white women) are dependent, vulnerable, pliant, weak, supportive, nurturing, intuitive, emotional, and empathic. (Becker, 1999, p. 27)

As stated in the results section of this study, the participants I interviewed were all very aware of the biases against them and how these biases affect how some men will view and treat them. These women appear to have coped with this behaviour and found ways to override their own discomfort in order to secure the success of the organization or movement.

Participant 5 shared a story of an experience she had in dealing with persistent requests for her time by men:

I usually go along with it because luckily from the meetings there's usually been a lot of information from me to glean from the people. And the partnerships or the— and I hate using the word stakeholder, but the stakeholder has been valuable enough that I've been like, 'I'm going to put the time into this'. If it was a stakeholder that wasn't as valuable, I wouldn't do it. I'm always measuring what's going to be worthwhile for the organization for me to merit spending so much time.

Participant 4 shared her account of how she dealt with men who also made requests for her time:

Well I used it to my advantage. I just went with it because it was working for me. It was making them feel comfortable to give me information or to have a conversation. They felt comfortable in that role and if they felt- you know it's like negotiation, it's like if they feel comfortable then I'm more likely to get what I want so, I used it...I also learned from it. I had people wanting to take me for dinner, not in a sexual way, but they wanted to

take me for dinner, gave me tickets to shows. It was this very interesting dynamic that was really funny, and for sure male colleagues did not get...It's one of those weird things where I was constantly like "oh god am I really feeding into this?" But then I'm like, "yeah I am" because it's actually not about me, or this, even though it's weird, but I'm getting what I want. I'm here for a job.

Ten out of ten participants state that they are impacted by patriarchal relationships. The specific barriers participants face can be linked to gender biases, sexism, misogyny, and toxic masculinity, but these all stem from the underlying root cause: patriarchy.

To their credit, the women I interviewed have done a tremendous job trying to affect changes where they are and with what they have been given. However, they have been tethered with a very short leash, meaning they have been given a certain amount of power and permission in their positions and within their movements, but not enough freedom to affect the substantial and sustainable systemic changes that they feel society needs. Furthermore, the leash is still being held by men who rule the other sectors and who typically do not want things to change (Ayed, 2020).

The experiences these women tolerated from men inside (and outside) their organizations is unacceptable in 2021. Yet, they continue to manage the attitudes and approaches to their leadership as they fight the larger systemic issues. They do this because they are fighting for something bigger, fighting for causes that would benefit us all - including the men that are resistant to things changing.

Limitations

The women that I ended up interviewing in this study were all white, or self-identified white passing, individuals. It was my intention to include, if not focus on, the experiences of

women (and women identified) people of colour in my interviews and I had sent invitations to this end. However, due to the timing of my interview requests this was not achieved. During the time of this study, we were going through the COVID-19 global pandemic (2020-2021), which resulted in half of the potential participants being either too busy, not having the capacity, or they simply did not reply to my invitation. Also, many Black, Indigenous, and racialized people had been dealing with heightened exposure to racial violence in the United States and here in Canada. This resulted in important conversations, but also put an incredible pressure on many Black, Indigenous, and racialized people (especially women) who had since been asked to perform free labour for white people wanting to enter into these conversations about systemic issues such as racism.

This latter explanation of why Black, Indigenous, and racialized participants were not involved in my study was confirmed after speaking to a former Indigenous colleague, who shared a public post stating that white people should not expect people of colour to do things for them for free. I fully agree with my colleague's statement and would like to see changes made within institutions, and systems, in regards to how we are taught and expected to approach other people's time and energy in order to provide data for studies within academia. Otherwise, we may continue to uphold white dominant culture by excluding marginalized voices who would undoubtedly add breadth and depth to our studies. We simply cannot keep doing things the way they have always been done - expecting people to offer us their stories, experiences, and information for free. One recommendation I highly suggest here is that institutions normalize the provision of funding for studies that include the collection of data from marginalized places and people.

Other recommendations I suggest are further study in the following areas: 1) the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and racialized people leading social movements *and* social movement organizations, 2) my theory of ‘arm candy activism’ and, 3) men contextualizing women in leadership by their relationship to themselves.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to highlight the barriers and opportunities for women and their leadership of current social movements organizations in Canada. The data set and research verify that women are dealing with barriers that are persistent within their organizations, throughout the larger movements, and across all three sectors. The information I gathered from the women leading social movement organizations aligned with the preliminary research I had done of women’s experiences leading within the third sector (non-profit). Specifically, in revealing similar barriers for women in leadership.

The results of previous studies found in research papers over the last two decades were both interesting and encouraging to me. During this time, the barriers to women were mostly focused on the glass ceiling phenomenon and the pay gap. However, these did not appear as primary problems in this study. Instead, they were secondary barriers. This is not to say that women in previous studies were not also sexualized, contextualized, patronized, or bullied while doing their work. Instead, it is more likely that they did not feel they could speak their experiences and be safely heard while they were still working in white male dominated spaces.

Today, however, women are speaking out more boldly about the issues they are facing or witnessing other women facing, as is the case of the #MeToo movement. Spreading on social media in October 2017, the #MeToo movement “revealed the prevalence and magnitude of problems with sexual harassment and assault, especially in the workplace, including academia

and medicine” (Lee, 2018, p. 433). While the problems women are facing may be the same, how these women are speaking of them is changing and should be documented beyond social media.

Now that there are more women in leadership willing to speak out about their experiences, beyond the glass ceiling and pay gap, academic papers like this one documenting their experiences, will be added to the research. As the authors of *Women and Leadership: Real Lives, Real Lessons* said, we should not need an academic paper to validate women’s “daily lived experiences of being underestimated, mansplained to, talked over or having their ideas ignored or purloined” (Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2020, p. 162), but once again here they are.

The importance of this study for me was not only to verify, with data, the barriers to women’s leadership within the social sector, but to hold space for how these women would speak out about patriarchy as it relates to their leadership and movements. I expected that each of the women would have much to share, what I did not expect was how meaningful and powerful the conversations would be in providing camaraderie, clarity, and in some cases, closure for myself. During my first few interviews, one participant and I laughed at the end, noting how cathartic it was for her to speak her experiences out loud, and for me to hear them.

I want to honour the experiences that were shared with me. I do not want these women’s stories to simply be voiced to me and contained within this study. Instead, my hope is for their experiences to be shared in order to help transform their situations and others like it. I hope that the men who read this paper not only begin to support female leaders more than before, but that they go beyond that to do the necessary internal and external work of confronting and dismantling patriarchy for the benefit of all women in leadership who are still hindered by lack of genuine solidarity and the actions of some men who wish to maintain the status quo.

In the face of their greatest barrier (the patriarchy) these women are nothing less than resilient; leading with great resolve in the face of constant resistance. These are powerful women doing important work for the sake of us all. They have shared their stories loud and clear, now we must do the work, so that things change for the better.

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Table 1*Participant Professional Information*

Participants	Role	Years in Current Role	Years in Social Justice Work	*Classification of Organization
P1	Executive Director	19	23	Social Services Charity
P2	Chief Executive Officer	2	30	Grant Making Foundation
P3	Executive Director	2	13	Advocacy Non-Profit
P4	Head Campaigner	10	16	Environmental Non-Profit
P5	Manager	4	5	Environmental Charity
P6	President	1	6	Environmental Charity
P7	Executive Director	1	39	Advocacy Non-Profit
P8	Executive Director	2	19	Environmental Non-Profit
P9	Manager	2	6	Environmental Non-Profit
P10	Executive Director	5	11	Environmental Non-Profit

*Classified by primary area of activity according to the International Classification of Non-profit Organizations (ICNPO). It is the classification system recommended in the United Nations (UN) Handbook on Non-profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts, 2003.