

Moonshot: Making the Equality Fund

Episode 1: From Match to Movement

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: This is a love letter to a charity called the Equality Fund, which launched with an ambitious goal: to move a billion dollars into the hands of human rights organizations and movements around the world.

Feminist movements are already creating change. They are at the frontlines of tackling climate, gender-based violence, poverty, sexual and reproductive health, democracy. But they currently receive less than 1% of funding.

And we want to change that. We are a community of feminists, stretching across decades and continents, who saw a chance to change the game. Together, we have built a model that will sustain and fuel human rights movements over time.

Some of us, like me, work at Equality Fund....but many of us have worked in service of a great idea and who are part of the secret sauce that brought this big bet to life.

Since 2019, we have moved \$100 million dollars in support of a 1,000 of feminist organizations working across a hundred countries... and we're just getting started.

We want to share our story in all of its complexity - celebrations and setbacks, invention and exhaustion, struggle and triumph. This podcast is for activists, community leaders, innovators, and policymakers trying to create a better world. To offer lessons, insights, and perhaps most of all – motivation – for anyone else who is working to disrupt the status quo and build something new.

I'm Jess Tomlin, one of the co-founders of the Equality Fund. And this is "Moonshot," an origin story.

As with most transformative stories of change, the work happens over decades. Our story is no different.

The year 1975 was a major milestone for women's rights globally. The United Nations designated it as International Women's Year and convened the first global conference on women in Mexico City.

This historical global moment put women's rights on the map- two Canadian leaders and one year later, in 1976, a new charity was on the scene. It was called MATCH International Centre. Norma E. Walmsley and Suzanne Johnson-Harvor created MATCH with the revolutionary idea to put women's rights at the centre of eradicating poverty and the full realization of human rights for everyone. MATCH went on to fund over 650 women's organizations in 71 countries.

Like all feminist breakthroughs, MATCH was a team effort. Another leader there from the beginning was Dr. Peggy Antrobus, renowned global feminist thinker. From the start of her incredible career in 1974, Dr. Antrobus has advanced women's rights and international development around the world,

She was one of MATCH's first board members and then rejoined the MATCH board 40 years later. Peggy is an integral part of the Equality Fund journey.

Peggy Antrobus: I like to remember the beginning because it was like an age of innocence. I'm one of those people who thinks that the world started in 1975 with International Women's Year.

And for the first time, under UN sponsorship, women from all around the world had an opportunity to meet each other, to listen to each other's stories, to get to know each other better.

Somebody has described it as the greatest consciousness-raising event in history, and I absolutely agree with that. None of us imagined how profoundly that event was going to

change our lives. We came from that conference feeling that finally, we reached the summit. The world understood that women's rights were human rights. And human rights were women's rights. There were no women's funds at the time.

The whole concept of the call for a new international economic order - that was very new. In fact, I didn't see, and many women didn't see what is the relevance of this? Well, now, today, we know that we cannot talk about women now without challenging that framework. People started organizing. We thought we were going to change the world. But, almost from the beginning, there was pushback.

At every conference, the right wing took that as an opportunity to push back on women's rights. And of course, there we are now, the rollback of Roe versus Wade and the climate crisis. One of the big shifts from 1975 to, let me say, the 1990s was the understanding that these are interlocking crises.

I never understood the power of those structures of patriarchy, capitalism, and I would say white supremacy, and how they interlock. We understand the complexity now. We didn't talk about intersectionality. In the late 80s, I think that was when we began to see those interlinked struggles. The patriarchy is so deep, the capitalism is so deep, the white supremacy is so deep, and they're linked in a way that we did not understand that I don't think we understood that in the beginning.

20 years after '75 we realized we're in a different era.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: Enter Joanna Kerr. She has spent her career advancing women's leadership, climate action, nature protection, and Indigenous rights. Joanna was the chair of the MATCH board and she talks about the focus- and challenges of MATCH in the 90s.

Joanna Kerr: I go way back to the MATCH International Centre way back in the early 90s it was changing the face of international development back then. When it was one of the

very, very few international organizations that were working in a solidarity model with grassroots women's groups around the world.

Jess Tomlin: since 1976, it had worked to support hundreds of grassroots organizations in hundreds of countries around the world. It has had this incredible Canadian feminist legacy. There were women and men who were giving to this organization and had been giving to this organization for decades. And, like many organizations, it had become overly dependent on the Canadian government, which is a problem we have in Canada in terms of our dependence on government funding in order to carry out social impact work. And because of that, I think, in spite of this incredibly long-standing, loyal donor base of women, mostly, but not exclusively, from coast to coast to coast, the organization had had to kind of box itself in and become something that it perhaps wasn't.

Joanna Kerr: And through the 90s, it was increasingly required to be almost an implementing agency of CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency, and was becoming much more of a technical delivery as opposed to a feminist solidarity-based organization. It was the nature of the funding, and it was the nature of what was available in terms of funding it, even though the organization had a lot of individual donors.

Jess Tomlin: It had always been an organization that wanted to fund the agenda of local grassroots organizations and movements who were driving feminist agendas in their communities. And suddenly there was all this layering around projectization and doing it within specific themes around health and women or economics and women, or food security and women.

and that's not, as we know, the way in which intersectional feminist movements work. And it wasn't the way they were working in the 90s either.

Fast forward to 2010, 2011 the organization quite publicly was defunded by the Stephen Harper government, the conservative government in Canada at the time. The reason it was defunded was in part because it had sort of lost its soul and was doing what others

told it to do in order to stay alive, and in part because we had a really political agenda, right?

Joanna Kerr: Lo and behold, the funding was drying up and political changes, management changes, MATCH really wasn't able to sustain itself. And it shut its doors.

Jess Tomlin: So when I came into the story it was 2012 and I had just returned from working in the Middle East with the UN. I didn't know about the story of MATCH. But I became quite seized with what was possible. Again, this incredibly loyal, long-standing, robust group of feminists from across Canada, working to match resources to the resourcefulness of movement leaders in over a hundred countries.

Incredible legacy, incredible story. The organization had been run for many years. by a legendary Black leader in Canada, Rosemary Brown, you know there was just so much gold in there. And what had happened is a gentleman who had given the organization \$50 in 1986 had died and left his estate to MATCH.

It was enough money to think about and imagine what was possible. And at the time the board chair, a woman who I love and adore by the name of Patricia Harewood, she said to me, she said, figure out if there's a viable strategy for MATCH to exist.

Where should the assets of this organization go? Where should we tell our donors to go? Where can our former partners go for the funding that they so desperately need? And that's where the story began, actually, for me.

And it became abundantly clear really, really early in the multiple coffees and conversations that I had, that if MATCH didn't exist, then there was no insurance policy that Canada was going to show up for global feminist movements.

That the world had absolutely changed and so many international organizations had moved in the right direction, but this direct funding relationship where we're directly

funding the agendas of local grassroots organizations and movements that just did not exist, and so the way to do that is to build a fund.

Joanna Kerr: Fast forward, it's now 2011. And I am in Johannesburg. I'm now CEO of ActionAid International. And, I get this email from this Jess Tomlin. "We are looking at potentially bringing MATCH back and turning it into a women's fund." And I guess at this point I had felt okay with letting go of MATCH, right? But this Jess Tomlin woman was persistent and she said is there anything I can bring you from Canada? And, yeah, I was living in Johannesburg. You can get just about everything. But you know what you can't get in Johannesburg? Is Mexican food.

Maybe now, if there's listeners, maybe they'll say, no, no, you can! But at the time, you couldn't get any salsas, or... good... refried beans. So lo and behold, this Jess Tomlin walks into this place where we were going to have tea with two shopping bags filled with cans and jars of Mexican food.

And by the end of the conversation, I said, I want to be on your board. I want to do anything to support you to turn this idea into a reality. And, that's how I first entered into the phase two of MATCH.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: Here's Mebrat Beyene, co-chair of the Equality Fund Board. Mebrat's connections to the Equality Fund go back to its MATCH days. Her magic is helping nonprofits through change and growth, and she reflects on MATCH's strong foundation already built.

Mebrat Beyene: MATCH had decades of experience in grantmaking, and in supporting grassroots women's organizations and had a really strong foundation built on true relationships throughout the Global South, with feminists and with activists who are actually doing the work. And that so much of that was rooted there, right?

MATCH was uniquely positioned because of how much intention, thoughtfulness, thoroughness, and care there was around understanding this model, and further understanding this model within an overtly feminist lens.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: Here's Nicky McIntyre, the CEO of Foundation for a Just Society. A private family fund based in New York that advances the rights of women, girls and LGBTQI+ people throughout the world. They would be among the Equality Fund's earliest champions.

Nicky McIntyre: The creation of the Equality Fund was really a pivotal moment, moving more and better resources to, feminist organizations. It was a time of great creativity and boldness and when we look at the international landscape, there was this growing interest in women's rights and feminist foreign policy. And in large part because of the advocacy and role of women's rights organizations and the role that they were playing in social change in societies around the world.

Joanna Kerr: there was the Global Fund for Women and there was Mama Cash in the Netherlands. And then there were, you know, the South Asian Women's Fund and the Brazilian Women's Fund and the African Women's Development Fund. These funds were growing as a direct response to the fact that grassroots, community-led, feminist-led initiatives were still critically and chronically underfunded. And that so much of the funding for these issues was being intermediated by large international NGOs or government-to-government funding. And there was this growing women's funding movement that was trying to ensure that feminists were raising money to put it in the hands of feminists on the ground. And so, Canada didn't have such a fund.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: If there ever was a time to change this, that time had arrived. Governments across the globe were beginning to prioritize funding to support women's rights – offering promising models and a chance for others to join in on the momentum.

Nicky McIntyre: when I was director at Mama Cash. Which is the oldest international feminist fund, and it's based in the Netherlands. I worked alongside MATCH as part of a growing movement of women's and feminist funds.

That movement really kind of was emerging in the mid-1980s. And Mama Cash had been a part and really along with many others but it played a significant part in different advocacy processes that had led the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to embark, and I think it was back in late 2007 or something like that, on a series of new funding mechanisms for gender equality that targeted women's rights organizations.

Then we also saw in 2014 the Swedish government adopt the world's first explicitly feminist foreign policy. And the Swedish government had already been funding women's rights organizations with a lot of kind of flexible core support.

And then the Canadian government came out with its first dedicated feminist international assistance policy in 2017. So you've got all of this like shifts in the landscape and this growing kind of consensus. And then second, the shift in thinking within the Dutch government was really a watershed moment.

It demonstrated that governments could in fact resource local, national, and regional feminist organizations.

We used those lessons of those successes with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to develop relationships with other bilaterals who were also interested and invested in pushing the envelope with their own funding. This is how we got first connected with the government of Canada. To create a funding mechanism tailored to its particular interests and priorities to support women's rights organizations in Canada and around the world.

Joanna Kerr: And so the opportunity was ripe. 2018, you know, the MeToo movement is now visible and mainstream, where those of us who've been working on violence against women in the shadows, this was now a conversation at everybody's dinner table and the

consciousness was shifting in terms of how globally pervasive and systemic violations of women and girls rights were at the time.

And then you had a new Prime Minister in Canada that was unapologetically feminist. So, you could feel the eyes of the rest of the world, and our feminist friends poking their heads into those of us in Canada saying, hey sisters, it sounds like there's a bit of an opportunity there to grow beyond just another women's fund, but was there an opportunity to think dramatically differently about how to drive systems change.

Mebrat Beyene: In 2018, we still had Prime Minister Trudeau's mandate around gender balancing his cabinet and his emphasis on gender equality certainly meant that there were now policies on the books that community could hold the government to account, specifically their introduction of the Gender-based Analysis Plus framework allowed lots of organizations, including MATCH, to reference those policy initiatives and goals.

We were also in the midst of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, the MeToo movement happening globally, I would say all of these meant that we had a landscape in 2018 where there were much more conversations about issues of gender, about women's status, about women's health and safety, that was moving out of our grassroots community work and moving into mainstream conversations.

I think for funding organizations, funding bodies, and for philanthropists, it also provided more of a benchmark and more of guidance around how to support community and how to prioritize women, women's issues, girls', and how to live at the intersection of gender and race. So I would say that those things were rife for MATCH and then eventually the Equality Fund to work in partnership with community and community organizations, feminists, activists, to push government and other policymakers and funding bodies to address women, women's issues, gender-based violence, and feminist issues.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: And then, in May 2018, the game changer arrives. The Government of Canada announces that it's looking to create a unique partnership. One

that will catalyze new investments to support gender equality and women's rights in the Global South. To the tune of 300 million dollars. This would be the largest ever fund for gender equality in history. They put out a call for proposals from organizations across Canada to share their vision for this big and bold initiative.

Here's Katharine Im-Jenkins, Managing Director at the Equality Fund. Affectionately known as Kat.

Kat Im-Jenkins: When the government of Canada put out this call for proposals for 300 million dollars, it caught a lot of attention. I remember getting phone calls and emails from all over the world asking me about it. 300 million dollars is a lot of money. Up until this point, feminist work had survived on pennies, not the billions and millions that they needed to get the job done.

As a board member, it was clear to me that MATCH was poised to seize this moment. That this work would be led by feminists for feminists who were committed to doing things differently, experimenting and disrupting along the way.

That was really exciting.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: To win the bid, the proposal would require a strong feminist organization behind it - one with experience and deep connections to activists on the ground. This was the game-changing opportunity for MATCH. But given our history, was it the right decision to partner with government again?

Joanna Kerr: So I'm the chair of the board of the MATCH International Women's Fund. We have a five-by-five commitment that is: let's raise 5 million dollars in 5 years. Let's not raise a penny from government. Because the dependency and the relationship with the government of the previous entity, MATCH International, led to our demise.

So, I was quite excited that we were going to build the MATCH International Women's Fund without government funding.

So, enter stage right, Jess Tomlin with Jess Houssian with Sophie Gupta. Who'd all come together in various places with this really ginormous idea about creating an organization, leveraging this moment, building it also with an investment strategy so that we could discipline capitalism in a new way through gender-lens investing and get MATCH funding through philanthropy. And the idea was to build a billion-dollar fund. And I'm like, hold on a minute. This is going to be super tricky. And do we all know what we're doing here?

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: There were hurdles to climb to prove we were big enough to do this.

Jess Tomlin: So one of the things that the government of Canada did was that it laid out a big set of criteria in terms of what the applicants needed to have on the team.

and some of that criteria was like moonshot for feminist movements. Like you needed to have experience with overseeing a minimum of 30 million dollars in overseas investments in organizations in multiple countries and on multiple continents. Well, there isn't a woman's fund or feminist organization who had that experience or consecutive years of that experience. So we were not able to do it alone. We needed to have experience managing 300 million dollars in assets under management. Well, there's no feminist investments institution that has that experience either. And so, some might think we were set up to fail, but we just thought that this is a great opportunity to build collaboration.

Voiceover: We reached out to a bunch of different organizations, across nonprofit and private sectors. Organizations like Oxfam Canada, Community Foundations of Canada, the Canadian Women's Foundation, Yaletown, Gender Funder CoLab, Prospera the International Network of Women's Funds, African Women's Development, and especially the World University Service of Canada and Toronto Foundation....and the list goes on.

Jess Tomlin: What we learned really early on, and I stand by to this day, is that there are feminists lurking everywhere. And so we, in the Toronto Foundation, we were able to find a feminist leader who was really invested in seeing this become successful who had the experience of so much in terms of assets under management, other partners like WUSC

who had experience overseeing 30 million and the partnerships went on and on and on like that, whether that was with the Royal Bank of Canada or whether that was with Calvert Impact Capital or whether that was with the African Women's Development Fund, all of those partners came together in order to help us meet the really onerous and very significant criteria that the successful candidate would meet.

The Partnership for Gender Equality, which is the team that oversaw the process. And they decided that they were going to allow for the shortlisted, and by this time we were on the shortlist.

They decided they would let us present our ideas to a panel at the government offices. And so all of the shortlisted consortiums arrived in Ottawa and they had all, you know, worked to, you know, refine their pitch and develop their presentation. and we walked in there as Equality Fund. And I think there was 10 of us representing different organizations.

Kat Im-Jenkins: And there was a lot of competition from other really strong proposals, lots of great ideas from other groups, and MATCH was still such a small organization.

How could we pull it off?

Jess Tomlin: And we presented to the Government of Canada. And we had a few really compelling things on our side, but one of them was the Gender Funders CoLab. They're an important piece because they are a group of private philanthropic actors who have come together to strategically unlock net new resources for feminist movements.

And they have been an active, deep partner. Whether through their respective foundations like the Ford Foundation and Foundation for A Just Society and Wellspring and Oak Foundation, these folks were with Equality Fund from the very beginning.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: But of course, there were concerns from the beginning about accepting money from government and the restrictions that go along with it.

Here's Bea Gonzalez, co-vice president of Global Programs at the Equality Fund, who knows the behind-the-scenes of government partnerships from her two decades of experience working with women's rights organizations around the world.

Bea Gonzalez: We also had questions about whether this huge volume of funding with the terms and conditions that government funding comes with could it shift power? Could it have enough flexibility for a feminist approach, for feminist relationships with partners around the world?

Mebrat Beyene: How do you move this much money, and how do you work with governments while maintaining the values and the structures of feminist decision-making, feminist ways of being in community, feminist decision-making models, all of those things.

Jess Tomlin: I was very clear and the board was very clear that we were never going to be able to stand this organization up and have it led by and in service of feminist movements if it was constantly trying to fit into the box of government priorities.

And so, we knew we needed to create independence and autonomy. We knew we needed to deeply embody, trust-based philanthropy. and that's what we set out to do. And the idea of working with government again was not at all on my radar. We needed high-risk, high-reward partnerships.

We needed folks who understood trust-based philanthropy. We needed folks who understood what we were trying to do. And to their credit, many funders, institutional funders, family foundations, individuals in those early days really stepped up for that and it was unrestricted resources that they were using to support the emergence of the MATCH Fund in Canada.

And the promise was that we were going to finally unlock and tap into this idea that Canada had so much more it could do for the world.

Our ability to exist outside of government funding became our superpower because we weren't vested. We weren't fundraising from the government, and as the government switched power in Canada, the Stephen Harper government transitioned to the Trudeau government, there were different policy opportunities, right? And we could be a strategic counsel, an advisor, we could tell them unvarnished what we thought of their new international development policies or feminist policies and they sought our counsel.

One, we were distinct and different, and we were trying to do something different. Two, because we were entirely untethered to a financial relationship to them, which I think was powerful in and of itself. And three, because we were able to be influential of and in community with folks outside of Canada, like some of the large family foundations and institutional foundations were betting on the MATCH Fund, because of the promise that it held, and that reflected really well on our ability to then be in conversation and have some level of influence within the Canadian government at the time.

And so once the rules of the game changed, we could have those kinds of real discussions around what it was going to take, what boldness was required, what the form and the function needed to be in order to truly be in service of feminist movements globally, what it would mean in order to truly embody and live into the promise of this government and what they were trying to do around the world in this feminist brand that they had leaned into and what that needed to mean in terms of where the money goes and how the policies get shaped and all of that stuff, and that was the table that we set. And then we sat at that table and that made things easier to negotiate and dream because we were coming at it from a different direction.

Peggy Antrobus: It's not enough to use the word feminist anymore. You know, feminist or transformation.

What is it you're trying to transform? What is it you're trying to do? I think that has to be a central question. Do you want change or not? I mean, to me, the biggest challenge is how to keep hope alive. And to keep the struggle going, people have to have hope. You're located at a little dot on the periphery of that big picture.

But if you know the big picture, you know that what you're doing is contributing to changing that. That might be the most important thing that the Equality Fund can do in these dark and complex times, that is to help people to see how what they're doing and what you're supporting them to do, because your support is what makes it possible for them to do certain things, How what they're doing; it's contributing to that kind of world we want to see.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: On the next episode...

Mebrat Beyene: It's very easy for mission and vision creep to happen when this much revenue and resources are on the line. So really listening when we had concerns around the potential for values misalignment, making sure that folks are being brought along. And that their voices are present in everything that we do.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: This was the first episode of our three-part series, Moonshot: Making the Equality Fund. The team that worked on this series is Tatiana Buba, Sarah Matsushita, Catherine Hodgson, Nicole Fischer, and Joe Voeller. Our cover art is by Kamo Frank.

This podcast is produced and mixed by Katie Jensen at Vocal Fry Studios.

I'm Jess Tomlin. Thanks for listening.