

Moonshot: Making the Equality Fund

Episode 2: The Winning Bid

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: On this episode...

Mebrat Beyene: It's very easy for mission and vision creep to happen when this much revenue and resources are on the line. The model of the equality fund, gender lens investing... there is a different way to work with community, really listening when we had concerns around 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: I'm your host, Jess Tomlin, and this is part two of our three part series, Moonshot: Making the Equality Fund.

We left off in 2018, with a monumental \$300M on the table to advance women's rights in a way that had never done before. The Equality Fund was now leaping into action. This was our moment to seize the potential of a philanthropic and political opening in Canada, build a global women's fund, and – *most important of all*: catalyze new, abundant, resources for feminist movements all over the world.

But the clock was ticking. We had just 8 months to get the bid together. And the competition was fierce: We were going up against some of the most established international institutions in the world. What would set our proposal apart?

This is Theo Sowa, co-chair of the Equality Fund Board. The former CEO of the African Women's Development Fund, Theo is a globally renowned feminist thinker, leader and builder- who saw how investment could finally address the scarcity of funding for women's rights organizations and other social justice movements.

Theo Sowa: Many African feminists that I had been working with, one of the biggest things that we kept seeing was a starvation of resources.

And at the same time, we were trying to work with a series of funders and donors, many of whom had great intentions, but whose ways of funding ended up putting movements in competition with each other. We were really watching money undermine the very heart of the movements that we wanted to see happening, and so there was a growing conviction that until we had more consistent, autonomous longer-term, reliable funding that we didn't have to jump through a million hoops to get we were always going to be, wading through treacle.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: Funding that was flexible enough to respond to problems on the ground, in real time. Funding that was big enough to match how big our dreams were. Funding that could protect those vulnerable from future harm.

Right from the start, one key feature set the Equality Fund model apart from all the rest: our investment arm. This innovation would allow us to ensure the sustainability of the Fund well into the future.

Theo Sowa: the vision was that if we invested well, we could use the interest coming out of those investments to have this consistent, longer-term, autonomous funding.

Jess Tomlin: the piece that differentiates the Equality Fund is the investment portfolio. Our investment committee chair at the Equality Fund, Ilse Treurnicht talks about this all the time, you know, the hundreds of billions of dollars in the world, very little of it is actually moving through philanthropy. The majority of it is moving through investment. And so the vision for Equality Fund was to put that money to good use.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: Now, before we go any further, let's talk about the elephant in the room. If you talk to most feminist activists, markets and investments are hardly a source of solutions, they're part of the problem. And for very good

reason. The global financial system is deeply flawed – widely perceived to perpetuate harmful forms of capitalism that only creates inequality and injustice....which our work seeks to transform. The challenge was clear: To shift resources for good, shifting power- including how capital is invested- was essential.

Vini Bhansali led discussions with activists in the Global South to hear their hopes for what the Equality Fund could do for feminist movements. She drew on her deep experience working with funders to get resources to the frontlines of movements for racial, gender and climate justice.

Vini Bhansali: One of the greatest places of tension was around investments.

There was a lot of disbelief in capitalism having the tools to solve feminist problems. There felt like a real discrepancy between the desire to grow this pot of money, through investing in the public markets while also understanding that those same markets have caused much harm.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: At its core, our investment program seeks to transform the way the financial ecosystem serves both people and the planet. It will support change -by helping to finance our grantmaking- and drive change -by influencing the financial ecosystem- all at the same time. It's common for foundations to have endowments - these endowments are invested in markets. Many Investment strategies seek to cause no harm or mitigate harm in some way. But at the Equality Fund, we want to see if we can create positive outcomes and momentum for investment through a gender lens. Investments that are both good for the bottom line and also drive change.

The key to it all is Gender-lens investing. Developed by many incredible feminist economists and investors, including the late and legendary Suzanne Biegel, gender-lens investing is the idea that investments should be anchored in the values of gender equality because it's good for profits and for people.

Theo Sowa: the investment arm of the Equality Fund is really important. I think as people who've been working with money and movements and have come from women's funds. It's sometimes too easy just to fall back on the idea of grants and grantmaking. I think grants are incredibly important.

But it's not enough. We're looking at tiny trickles of money often controlled by other people. And if you're not careful about how you negotiate, the control ends up leaking into the work that we're trying to do.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: As so many social innovators will recognize, government funds represent both a huge opportunity, and, a very real challenge at the same time. While the scale of funding is both sustained and significant, so are the strings attached. If you're not careful, your very mission is at risk. At MATCH we had learned this lesson once before.

Here's Mebrat Beyene, co-chair of the Equality Fund Board, who you also heard from in Episode 1. Here, she explains the risks and concerns embedded in *where* funding comes from, including the government.

Mebrat Beyene: There would always be a concern in partnering with a federal body with a government that has so much accountability to adhere to that their forms of accountability may be at odds with what feminists require and what community requires.

Vini Bhansali: You know, I think that all the global southern movements had had many experiences with their voices, their perspective, and their wisdom not being at the center of the processes that determine how philanthropic resources are allocated to their work, often feeling like decisions are made for them, on behalf of them.

Theo Sowa: So it was about how do you invest in ways that don't undermine women's rights? How do you invest in ways that promote gender equality, racial

equality, all of the qualities that we want to see? How do you invest in women in different ways so that those women are able to reach their full potential?

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: The answer is simple. You ask.

Vini Bhansali: And so it was extremely powerful, one for the leaders to simply be asked. And then secondly, to have a role in shaping how the fund was going to be designed.

When we truly listen to the people that are on the front lines of our movements and that are trying to build solutions out of really difficult circumstances and conditions, their clarity and their bravery is astounding.

Mebrat Beyene: The one area that for me was very exciting was that there is a different way to work with community, that there is a different way to leverage resources, that there is a different way to work with government, and holding those bodies to account with actual resources and actual dollars that are substantial, that is audacious, and I would say appropriately audacious.

So what was exciting was to be able to show this as a model that other funders, governments, individual donors, the philanthropic community could be adopting. And I know, even at that time, it forced people to evaluate their understanding of community-based and trust-based philanthropy and trust-based grantmaking. Federally as well, right, really pushing the Canadian government to test out this model and to really work with community in a new and a different way.

Theo Sowa: I am not naive. We are not going to change the whole of the investment industry. We will always have parts of the investment industry that are actively harmful.

But if we can actually try to work with people to get some different outcomes, then I like to think of it as us investing in women across the board, investing in women, not just in terms of shifting power balances, but also in terms of shifting power balances within some of the most unequal areas in our world. And that's capital.

That's money.

And when you think about the amount of money that goes into investment and how much of that money actually undermines women's rights, the ability to shift that even by a few percentage points, to actually get investors thinking differently, to get investors to question who owns these assets, who drives the production, how fair and equal and just are the ways in which these investments are being made.

If we could actually manage to shift industry to think differently about investing and investing justly, we were talking about trillions of dollars. We were talking about magnitudes more money than we will ever find in grantmaking.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: There is no better time to bring in the amazing Jess Houssain. She is the co-founder of the Equality Fund and together we served as co-CEOs until late 2023 when she moved on to new adventures.

As we were building the proposal, we were so lucky to connect with Sophie Gupta, Principal and Head of Responsible Investing at Yaletown Partners. She's a current Equality Fund board member and she was instrumental in showing us the vision of how other forms of capital could drive our financial model. She broke it all down for us – and showed us how investing with a purpose had the real potential to fund women's rights at scale.

Jess Houssian: I mean, Sophie, we wouldn't be here without her. There's no doubt about it. Like, one of the most interesting parts of the Equality Fund, I think then now, was this idea that we would bring under one tent for women and girls and non-binary folks a place for investment capital and charitable dollars and this feminist grantmaking. And Sophie led that.

I mean, you and I were like, what's a stock? And like what does capital mean exactly, what? So having her deep experience and understanding of the investment world and her personal feminism and her personal philanthropy and commitment to gender equality, both Canadian domestic and globally was, I think, really essential and set us on our path.

And it's amazing that she's on the Board now because she has this institutional memory of the early days and often, like, you know, we're checking in with her vision on the investment side and ensuring that we're staying true to what we wanted to build.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: But as with any bold endeavour, there were lessons along the way.

Jess Houssian: For me in the beginning, asking all these partners to come on board felt like we were asking for a favour. What a mistake that was because I think for every single partner, we were like, this is our build. This is our vision. We have to win. We're in a battle and we need your help. And can you please help us, because it's really important.

And that is not what this was. It's not, "can we have your money please because we're onto something great." It's like, "do you want to come in and be part of something absolutely epic... for you?"

We recommend it for you, like be a part of this because it will serve your leadership, it will serve your organization, it will serve history. You want to be part of this.

That is something I wish I had done differently from the get-go. I understood differently because I often felt like we were asking for favours when what we were doing was, actually inviting people into something beautiful.

Jess Tomlin: If Equality Fund was successful, then Gender Funder CoLab, this collective of philanthropic actors, was going to put money on the table.

And their leader, a woman by the name of Keely Tongate came to Ottawa as part of this presentation. And we were nervous and we were the underdogs. It's absolutely clear that that was the case because this just had never been done before.

And Gender Funder CoLab represented a really interesting possibility because they were, on behalf of philanthropy, like putting money on the table.

They made a 25 million dollar philanthropic guarantee. And the government was really interested in that and they said, wow, that's really powerful. You know, to what extent will you work in partnership with anybody who's successful in winning this bid?

And Keeley, on behalf of that group, said, no, we're here because we believe the Equality Fund is the transformative idea. And I think we are here today because the people who showed up as part of the Equality Fund from the beginning just had skin in the game.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: Here's Keely Tongate, Co-Director of Gender Funders CoLab, whose early investment – and influence – proved essential in making the case for our successful bid.

Keely Tongate: we had the backing of this network of funders who, you know, granted over 250 million dollars, I believe at that time. So, you know, like a substantial, and they were excited and wanted CoLab to have a presence in the Equality Fund story because they felt like the potential was there to do things differently to try to unlock resources from different parts of the ecosystem, like governments, but in particular, the investment piece, because that was really untapped. I think what caught my attention was this level of creativity around not just doing things in the same way. So around that same time, the CoLab had started a pooled fund to support feminist movements like leverage and pool their resources to try to access those larger bilateral grants. And here was a feminist fund coming forward and saying, yeah, and we have another vision of doing that in a way that.

looks at the investment side, looks at the feminist grantmaking side and it looks at, you know, the role that governments and private philanthropy can play to seed an initiative.

I feel like the CoLab members were really excited and energized about... at that moment it really did seem like governments were a really strategic place to be building relationships and trying to understand how they work and trying to understand this unique added value that philanthropy could provide because you know, philanthropy is more flexible.

So to build relationships across the table and think really strategically about how together these collaborations could be maximized for the benefit of the field.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: Keely wasn't alone. Manisha Mehta leads programming for advancing gender justice at Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, a key CoLab member, and one of the most important allies in our journey. Wellspring became our first US institutional partner and their investment was crucial seed funding that brought more funders to the table. Manisha was the Chair of GFCL during these crucial years as Equality Fund was coming to life.

Manisha Mehta: When the idea was proposed to us about a new global women's fund, there were a number of reasons we wanted to support the fund because we knew that if it worked, we would be able to support work on a broad scale, to support feminist organizing and movement building across a variety of issue areas, gender-based violence, climate and racial justice, sexual and reproductive health and rights, just to name a few.

And we also felt that the Equality Fund, because it was global in nature, could serve as a connector, across and convener for fields and movements.

It was a risky proposition for us to some degree. The idea was aspirational and it was really new and it raised a lot of questions. Such as, would the Canadian

government be willing to do things in a feminist way or would we have to compromise to such a degree that it wouldn't make sense? Would civil society organizations and activists be willing to compromise so that champions within the government of Canada would be able to get what they needed to advocate for this type of fund?

If it failed, what would people take away as messages about women's rights and gender justice work, and actually our ability to work together with very different partners.

But we also knew that if it succeeded, it would be incredible and what a message it would send to the world. This would be an ongoing and resilient resource for movements. It would challenge conceptions about feminist organizing that has prevented resources from making their way to work on the ground.

It would challenge the notion that different funders could not work together.

And for us and for other donors, it would really allow us to leverage our funding and collectively learn together in order to ensure a greater impact for women's rights and for gender justice.

Jess Tomlin Voicever: The big moment had arrived. Eight months of intense collaboration and nail-biting suspense were behind us.

On a summer day in 2019 in Vancouver, Canada, feminists from all over the world had gathered together at Women Deliver, a global conference on women's health, and equality. They were awaiting a big announcement. Our announcement.

As a line of women, we took deep breaths and filled the stage, we shared the news. The Equality Fund won the bid. All \$300 million would be devoted to the fund we had worked so hard to build.

Keely Tongate: I was there and so were most of the members of our network. We actually took all of this so seriously that we did some organizing amongst our membership throughout Women Deliver and then we had our membership meeting immediately afterwards at the Gates Foundation in nearby Seattle. So we were there and we were just so happy, like so incredibly happy because it felt like in our sector, we don't have enough wins all the time and it felt like a profound win and it felt very beautiful, very community, very spacious. I feel like the Equality Fund does a really fabulous job of bringing people together.

I feel like we deeply felt like we were part of the process and we were part of the win and then, from there, the building and all of it that came afterwards.

[Clip from Maryam Monsef's speech at Women Deliver]: Today we've done something incredible. Canada is reshaping how we invest in women's organizations and movements here in Canada and around the world. and we are united in this room by a belief that gender equality is good for everyone. Gender equality is the right thing to do. It's about fairness. It's what our mothers and grandmothers and those before them have been asking for. It's also the smart thing to do, as the Prime Minister says gender equality is good for the economy. Here in Canada, when we increase the participation of women in our economy, we will benefit from 150 billion dollars over the next decade. Globally, we're talking about a 12 trillion dollar economy. Gender equality is good for everyone. And the fact that we have governments and Prime Ministers proudly saying they are feminist now, it is because of a movement that has worked hard to bring us to this moment in time. We are all part of that movement. A movement that's existed long before any of us got here, a movement that will continue long after we're gone. And throughout history, women's organizations have been on the front lines of the women's movement driving change to build a better world for all.

Jess Tomlin: in Vancouver at Women Deliver. You know, it was touch and go there for a minute, but we found out that Equality Fund was successful in the Partnership for Gender Equality bid, and the minister would be announcing to the world that we were moving forward. You were there. You were in Vancouver.

What do you remember about that moment? Other than severe anxiety. Like even as I'm talking my shoulders are just going up to my ears.

Theo Sowa: The thing about it is, actually, in Vancouver, prior to that announcement, a lot of my anxiety had gone. I know that sounds really strange, but we had worked so hard. We had spoken to so many people. We had done so much advocacy.

And it almost felt that when the decision was being made, if it wasn't made in our favour, there really wasn't any more that we could have done in terms of consultations, pushing, visioning, you know, planning.

It really felt as if, if that decision had not gone our way, we would not have lost, per se. Because the work we had done in getting there was work that would never be lost. And work that would lead us to other solutions if this particular solution didn't happen immediately.

One of the things that made me happiest was that when we were discussing the Equality Fund, we also were working with other Canadian feminists.

So the fact that the announcement was not just about the Equality Fund, meant that we'd been able to do exactly what feminist activists want to do, which is collaborate rather than compete. And that was really important to me.

[Clip from Women Deliver, Organizations on stage being named]: Canadian Women's Foundation, Grand Challenges Canada, MATCH International Women's Fund, the Toronto Foundation, African Women's Development Fund, RBC Capital Market, Community Foundations of Canada, Philanthropy Advancing Women's Human Rights, otherwise known as PAWHR.

Theo Sowa: It felt as if we all won. All of us, all feminists, all women's funds, all social activists. And I think that that was the most exciting part about it, that we could show that cooperation and collaboration work.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: On the next episode...

Nicky McIntyre: This was a chance to bring together commitments from government donors, financial institutions, public and private foundations, in really one of the world's largest infusions of feminist funding.

We knew that when properly and sustainably resourced, we knew that feminist organizations could transform the world.

Jess Tomlin Voiceover: I want to take a moment to name a few MATCH staff who were instrumental to our success: Amany, Bea, Beth, Dana, Sue, Bonnie and Ann Elisabeth, and many others. Thank you.

This was the second 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.