



# RECKONING & REPAIR AS A FEMINIST EFFORT

A Report to the Nobel Women's  
Initiative

FINAL | JULY 2021

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# INTRODUCTION

# FEMINISTES I REBELS!

FELICMENT,  
JO SOC  
UNA DONA



*Maria Aurèlia*



THERE IS NO GATE,  
NO LOCK, NO BOLT  
THAT YOU CAN SET  
UPON THE FREEDOM  
OF MY MIND

A L'ATZAR AGRAEIXO  
TRES DONES: HAVER NASCUT  
DONA, DE CLASSE BAIXA I  
DE NACIÓ OPRIMIDA,  
I EL TÈRBOLE ATZUR  
DE SER TRES VOLTES  
REBEL.



*Maria Mercè Margal*



*Rigoberta Menchú*

I'M NO LONGER  
ACCEPTING THE THINGS  
I CANNOT CHANGE.  
I'M CHANGING  
THE THINGS  
I CANNOT ACCEPT.



ESTE MUNDO  
NO VA A CAMBIAR  
A MENOS QUE  
ESTEMOS DISPUESTAS  
A CAMBIAR

POL  
QUE  
FAR

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Her

## Friday, August 7, 2020: “Nobel Women’s Initiative founders ‘shaken’ as seven staff resign.”<sup>1</sup>”

The Guardian article described a collective resignation of a group of staff of the Nobel Women’s Initiative, known as the “Collective Care Team.” The women’s statement is a clear and thoughtful articulation of their concerns and desire for change. Thus, we feel compelled to open this report with the words of the women themselves:

### Who comprise the Collective Care Team?

*“Five staff and two core consultants – including all the women of color – have ceased our work with the organization. Our feminism is intersectional, anti-oppressive and decolonial. Our identities are African, Black, Jewish, Kurdish, Mexican American, Muslim and White. Collectively we represented the diversity of the organization.”*

### What is the problem from the Collective Care Team’s perspective?

*“Nobel Women’s Initiative, in our view, requires profound organizational reforms – based on transparency, equity, inclusivity and a commitment to uproot embedded patriarchal practices – in order to fully uphold its values.”*

### Did the Collective Care Team try to address their concerns before resigning?

*“We made several attempts to raise these concerns and propose solutions with all levels of leadership, before coming to this final decision. Failure to prioritize and address our concerns in a transparent and inclusive manner, and attempts to devalue and diminish our voices, led to our collective resignation.”*

### What resolution did the Collective Care Team seek?

*“We speak out today to protect future staff and women activists. We stand in solidarity with those – particularly from marginalized identities – who are bravely imagining more inclusive and decolonized work environments, even more so in international non-profit and feminist networks. We will continue to support feminist peace activists and movements globally in our individual capacities, but will not do so at the expense of our voices or wellbeing.”*

1. [www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/aug/07/founders-of-nobel-womens-initiative-shaken-by-staff-resignations](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/aug/07/founders-of-nobel-womens-initiative-shaken-by-staff-resignations)

## Who stood with the women?

Thirty-four former Nobel Women's Initiative employees, consultants, and interns who worked at the organization between 2007 and 2020 co-signed a [statement in solidarity](#) with the Collective Care Team:

*“Over the years, many of us expressed concerns about our well-being or the wellbeing of our colleagues, in different ways and through different forums.*

*“Over the years, many of us expressed concerns about our well-being or the wellbeing of our colleagues, in different ways and through different forums. Many of us felt we lacked a safe space or mechanism to fully share the issues we faced or witnessed. Some that did, faced repercussions. While at the time some action was taken to address the concerns we shared, what was required was reform within the Nobel Women's Initiative to address systemic issues within the organization's culture and structure.*

*We regret that we did not speak out more and demand transformative change, as this brave group of individuals did before and after their resignations at the Nobel Women's Initiative. We stand with them and echo their call for deep organizational transformation at the Nobel Women's Initiative.”*

## In an August 2020 response, NWI shared:

*“As an organization committed to peace, justice and equality, this is a moment for deep soul searching and change. For us, a healthy, healing and forward-looking outcome is fundamental for those involved in or touched by these recent events. While we were aware of organizational challenges, we deeply regret not recognizing the depth of their broader impact on staff. We are committed to taking all necessary steps to strengthen the organization, improve its workplace and support a healing process.”*

In November, the organization said that it had *“accepted the challenge to correct internal failures which have caused hurt and harm to people on our team.”* And further, *“...meaningful transformational change requires a willingness to be open and vulnerable. Nobel Women's Initiative is committed to unlearning, learning, and relearning to become better.”*

Throughout this report, we continue to share from the words of the women we interviewed—including those who shared their stories with Community Resource Exchange (CRE) directly; the perspective of the Nobel Laureates—NWI’s founders and board members; and we include as well the insights and perspective of the former organizational leadership, partners, and alumni.

This report seeks to:

- Summarize significant themes and share examples as appropriate
- Assess the circumstances—before, during, and after the collective resignation
- Name the sticky, messy issues that led to this internal rift
- Recommend actions for follow up to re-align, re-clarify, and uplift the purpose of NWI

This report does not seek to:

- Name specific individuals; rather, we name the norms and patterns that manifested as harm within the NWI<sup>3</sup>
- Villainize or blame; rather, we seek to illuminate what was, and to present individual profiles in as much totality as possible
- Judge; rather, we seek to understand the NWI situation within the context of social constructs that have long been at odds with the spirit and intention of social change, feminism, human rights, justice, and equality

2. By 'leadership' we refer to NWI's founding executive director and later, one or both of the co-executive directors (which includes the former founding executive director). Because of an active legal matter at the time of our data collection process, we did not speak directly to one of the co-executive directors.

3. Given the size of the organization and leadership tenure, some figures may be clear; however, it is not our intention to "out" anyone.



# BACKGROUND



*It is time to stand up, sisters,  
and do some of the most  
unthinkable things. We have  
the power to turn our  
upside-down world right.\**

\*These quotes from the laureates are included at the start of each section to highlight the beliefs and intentions for an organization that would catalyze feminist-led peace and change.

Indigenous

Women

will lead us

FORWARD

IND  
WOM

## ABOUT NWI

The Nobel Women's Initiative (NWI) envisions a world transformed by a rejection of war, militarism, violence, and discrimination...a world where global security is built around human rights, justice, and equality for people and communities...a world where sustainable peace and protection of the environment on which all life depends is a collective priority.

NWI was founded in 2006 by Nobel Peace Laureates Jody Williams, Wangari Muta Maathai, Shirin Ebadi, Mairead Maguire, and Betty Williams. These remarkable women established NWI in the belief that change is possible through the individual and collective participation of women in extraordinary efforts to transform the world. Today, five women peace laureates—Jody and Shirin, along with Leymah Gbowee, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, and Tawakkol Karman—leverage their awards to magnify the power and visibility of women working in countries around the world for peace, justice and equality. Through the priorities of NWI, the laureates work to strengthen and expand feminist efforts that foster nonviolent solutions to war, violence, and militarism.

These women's individual achievements around the globe—in the midst of war, catastrophic oppressions, gender-based violence, and great personal harm, loss, and trauma—are considerable:

- **Jody Williams** has been a life-long grassroots advocate of freedom, self-determination and human and civil rights since her protests of the Vietnam War. She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 for her work to ban landmines through the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

Jody oversaw the Campaign's growth to over 1,300 organizations in 95 countries working to eliminate antipersonnel landmines. Jody is the recipient of 20 honorary degrees and was named by Forbes Magazine as one of the 100 most powerful women in the world in the publication's first annual list. Since 2006, Jody Williams has served as the chair of the board of the NWI.

- **Shirin Ebadi J.D.** was awarded the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to promote human rights—particularly, the rights of women, children, and political prisoners in Iran. She is the first Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Dr. Ebadi also was one of the first female judges in Iran. She served as president of the city court of Tehran from 1975 to 1979. She was dismissed from that position after the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, and was made a clerk in the court she had once presided over.

In addition to being an internationally-recognized advocate of human rights, she has established many non-governmental organizations in Iran, including the Million Signatures Campaign, established to demand an end to legal discrimination against women in Iranian law. In 2004, she was named by Forbes Magazine as one of the 100 most powerful women in the world.

- **Leymah Gbowee** was born in Liberia and living there when the First Liberian Civil War erupted. After witnessing the effects of war, she decided to train as a trauma counselor to treat former child soldiers. When a second civil war broke out, Leymah mobilized an interreligious coalition of Christian and Muslim women and organized the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement. Through her leadership, thousands of women staged pray-ins and nonviolent protests demanding reconciliation and the resuscitation of high-level peace talks. The pressure pushed President Charles Taylor into exile and smoothed the path for the election of Africa’s first female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Leymah received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, a prize she shared with Johnson Sirleaf and Yemen native, Tawakkol Karman. As founder and president of Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa, Leymah continues to push for greater inclusion of women as leaders and agents of change in Africa.

- **Rigoberta Menchú Tum** is a Mayan k’iche’ activist born in a small Mayan community in the highlands of Guatemala. In 1960, ethnic and socioeconomic tensions spurred a brutal civil war against the Mayan people. Rigoberta and her family mobilized Guatemalans during the war to denounce government-led mass atrocities. Their activism came at a great cost—in 1980, Rigoberta’s father and thirty-seven other activists were murdered in a fire. Not long after, her mother and brother were tortured and murdered.

Rigoberta received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 in recognition of her work for social justice and ethno-cultural reconciliation based on respect for the rights of indigenous peoples. She ran for President of Guatemala in 2007 and 2011 under the banner of the first indigenous-led political party, which she founded. Rigoberta continues to seek justice for all Mayan people impacted by the genocide.

- **Tawakkol Karman** was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 in recognition of her work in nonviolent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peacebuilding work in Yemen. Tawakkol was the first Yemeni, the first Arab woman, and the second Muslim woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, as well as the youngest Nobel Peace Laureate at the time.

Growing up in a politically tumultuous country, Tawakkol witnessed civil war that led to dissidence and repression between north and south factions. Tawakkol responded to the political instability and human rights abuses in Yemen by mobilizing others and reporting on injustices. Bold and outspoken, Tawakkol has been imprisoned on a number of occasions for her pro-democracy, pro-human rights protests. She is known as “mother of the revolution” and “the iron woman.” Since receiving the award, Tawakkol has continued to support female journalists and rally Yemenis against government corruption and injustice.

- **Dr. Wangari Muta Maathai** was a founding member of the NWI, and the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—for promotion of sustainable development, democracy and peace. In 1976, she introduced the idea of community-based tree planting and continued to develop this idea into a grassroots organization whose main focus is poverty reduction and environmental conservation through tree planting. The organization eventually became known as the Green Belt Movement (GBM), and to-date has assisted women in planting more than 40 million trees on community lands including farms, schools and church compounds. Dr. Maathai passed away in September 2011.

**NWI's vision, mission, and programming reflect the strength, determination and commitment of these incredible women.**

**Tenets of their theory of change for NWI include shared beliefs that:**

- Sustainable change is driven by people power, and must be nonviolent
- Change is driven from the ground up; to build the world NWI envisions, it needs collective action—driven and shaped by grassroots organizers—that engages individuals, movements and policymakers at all levels of society
- Women are key to enduring peace
- Decision-making driven and shaped by local women's organizations and broader women's movements tend to focus on the common good.

**Through NWI, the laureates partner with NWI leadership and staff to:**

1. Invest in the power and leadership of young women activists by providing training, tools and connections to contribute to the global women's movement, including the Sister to Sister Mentorship Program.
2. Amplify women's voices in the media to help shift public conversations through capacity and skills building, including the InterviewHer platform for journalists seeking women peace building experts.
3. Ensure that women influence public policy concerning peacebuilding, human rights, and the environment through access to decision-makers by connecting women with decision-makers, advocating alongside national and local movements and campaign solidarity.
4. Support women's movement-building by championing women and working across movements to strengthen collective power for change. This includes annual delegations—including staff, laureates, funders—to war-torn countries in which NWI would collaborate with on-the-ground activists, local governments, and other partners.

**Today, the organization has a budget of just over \$1,100,000, a board of five laureates, and a staff of five (plus four consultants who have ongoing, sustained commitments to NWI).**

In addition to permanent staff, the organization has historically worked throughout the years with consultants and interns. For many of the interns and newer staff members, NWI was a first job and/or first experience with a global, feminist organization.

NWI's founding executive director had been its sole executive director from 2006 until 2020. NWI's board chair and the founding executive director had worked together on the transformational International Campaign to Ban Landmines, and continued to work closely at NWI in their respective board and staff leadership roles..

In 2020, a co-executive director role was created so that the founding director could focus on programming, fundraising, and visibility. By January 2021, both co-directors had left their leadership roles with NWI, and an Interim Executive Director has been in place since January 2021. The founding executive director stayed on with the organization in a consulting capacity, maintaining a stewardship role with philanthropic donors until May 2021.

The work of NWI is recognized as being of value by the majority of program participants, partners, and funders who spoke with Community Resource Exchange. The laureates' celebrity is seen by most as valuable in bringing awareness to female-led efforts to establish and protect human rights. Partners understand and appreciate the laureates' platform in illuminating the issues they are fighting. Alumni of Sister to Sister programming named many positive aspects of the exposure and experience.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT NWI ACHIEVEMENTS

In 2021, NWI has continued advancing its mission with the following projects and programs:

**A 12-week virtual Sister to Sister Mentorship Program** in collaboration with the Coady Institute at St Francis Xavier University, and co-created by 15 young feminist leaders and activists from 11 countries.

- The pandemic-driven pivot to a virtual platform allowed the partners to triple the level of participation over that of previous years.
- Participants built a transnational network to transform their own social justice work and support each other, collaborating to forge a shared vision for inclusive feminist peacebuilding and women's rights advocacy.

**“Unfinished Revolution,”** a thought piece reflecting on the status of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa ten years after the Arab Spring, produced in English and Arabic.

- Includes testimony, insights and analysis from 14 leading feminist activists in the region as well as the Women Human Rights Defenders MENA Coalition.
- The paper will be released later in 2021 to provide the foundation of a series of roundtables with regional leaders and stakeholders.

Production of **season three of When Feminists Rule the World** is underway.

- Five episodes, moderated once again by comedian Martha Chaves, will focus on sharing the stories of the Sister to Sister 2021 participants, and amplifying their extraordinary voices as they reflect on what they've learned, and what they have to share about feminist leadership, networking, solidarity and social power.

The continued **growth of Interview Her.**

- This platform connects the global media with 105 women experts on conflict, peace and security with connections to 40 countries.
- So far this year, 20 experts have been added, with 20 more projected by year end.

The ongoing optimization and **growth of NWI's social media channels** as primary outlets for campaigning, advocacy, story-telling, awareness-building, collaboration and mobilization.

- There are currently 166,207 followers on Facebook, 103,763 on Twitter and 23,269 on Instagram.

Ongoing involvement and **support for partner and coalition campaigns** and actions.



# NWI'S REQUEST



*We must teach ourselves to believe that peace is not a 'utopian vision', but a responsibility that must be worked for each and every day.*

THE FUTURE IS  
FEMALE



**In December 2020, the Nobel Women’s Initiative reached out to Community Resource Exchange to conduct a meaningful audit of the circumstances and consequences of a major internal rift in the summer of 2020 that led to a group resignation.**

**NWI sought to:**

1. Gather data about what led to the separation between staff and organizational leadership
2. Understand and explore what stakeholders see as NWI’s value and opportunities for improvement, as well as where the organization is aligned internally and externally, and where there is misalignment
3. Develop a clear set of actions for NWI to fully achieve its organizational objectives, and to sustain credibility and regard in the field

CRE proposed to lead an engagement that would tap key stakeholders—including current and former staff, program alum, board members, and partners—about how they have experienced or observed NWI’s organizational structure, policies, norms, and behaviors.

**We planned to ensure also that we:**

- Capture the nuance in stakeholders’ perspectives, given differences in, for example, lived experience, beliefs, ability, level of assurance, national origin and race/ethnicity
- Heard voices from different parts of the organization’s community, and as possible, voices that are inclusive of the communities NWI seeks to support
- Ensure that interventions we suggest reflect community input

**As we launched this process, the big questions that surfaced for us include:**

- How and why did internal challenges at NWI get to the point of a collective resignation?
- What led to misalignment between NWI’s internal culture and it’s external value, purpose, connection?
- How can NWI course correct and realign itself? To what end?

Data from all of our discussions inform CRE’s recommendations to NWI for responsive interventions to help the NWI community repair and heal. We hope that this repair will then allow NWI to more effectively manifest its mission and its practices, and to do so from a foundation of shared values, authentic connection, active listening, and fervent desire for everyone in the NWI community to thrive.

## CRE'S METHODOLOGY

With guidance from NWI's board chair and former co-executive director, CRE invited a representative group of stakeholders to reflect and share on:

- What they see as NWI's current core value, and strengths and challenges around that
- Alignment between NWI's purpose and the effectiveness of its execution
- What NWI should do to move forward

We held 1:1 conversations, conducted an alumni focus group, and collected some additional data via an anonymous survey. The entire Collective Care Team were invited to speak should they wish, and some did. From the outset however, Collective Care was clear about their deep disappointment in the board's initial refusal to speak with the group. Once the members of Collective Care had resigned, they generally no longer felt the need to invest time and emotional/mental energy trying to resolve NWI's internal issues (as was shared with the board, once the board opened up to speaking).

Stakeholder Type	# Participants
Current and former staff, including consultants, interns, and the founding executive director (we did not speak to the other co-director due to a pending legal matter).	15
Program alumni (in a single focus group)	3
Board members (plus one non-NWI employee who works for a board member and has been privy to some of the evolving circumstances at NWI)	5
Partner organizations	2
Funder organizations	2

Additionally, as we spoke with various members of former staff, including those not part of Collective Care, we noted several mentions about women who were afraid to speak, or refusing to speak, because they had signed non-disclosure agreements as part of NWI's regular hiring practice. NWI confirmed that any of the women, regardless of NDA status, were free to speak with CRE without retribution. Even after our planned end date for data collection, several women reached out asking to speak once they understood that doing so would not be held against them.

## PRESENTING ISSUE AND TIMELINE

*July 2020: A group of five staff and two core consultants collectively resigned from the Nobel Women's Initiative. The group, comprising African, Black, Jewish, Kurdish, Mexican American, Muslim and White women, describe their feminism as "intersectional, anti-oppressive and decolonial." The following is a general timeline of building tensions between these women and the NWI leadership:*

- **SEPT 2019:** During a staff retreat, some staff members raised concerns to leadership regarding perceived inequities in power dynamics, communications, workload, and other matters.
  
- **JAN 2020:** In January, the group, which had formed to become the "Collective Care Committee," followed up with a detailed report—informed by an anonymous survey the group designed to create a safe space for sharing—about concerns and suggestions for resolution. Issues and concerns raised in the survey and report include:
  - Stress, burnout, and fatigue from overwhelming workloads and long work hours
  - Insecurity about the future, and lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities
  - Sense of not belonging
  
- **JUNE 2020:** In mid-June, the contract of a well-regarded consultant was terminated in a way that several members of the staff, including members of Collective Care, felt was unfair and retaliatory. The group followed up in late June with a 6-month review about the progress of the response from leadership. In this report, Collective Care further documented concerns, including their experience of:
  - Toxic work culture, including what the group felt was an unfair termination of a core consultant
  - Lack of leadership accountability
  - Aggressive communication such as ageism, implicit bias, and microaggressions
  - Disparity in pay including wide gaps in pay for staff, and lower pay for full-time staff than for consultants
  - The constrictive physical environment in which the staff worked (pre-pandemic and also during the work from home period)

Each Collective Care report presented a set of recommendations for resolution. In the update, the group acknowledged actions leadership took to address their concerns, such as:

- Monthly stipends to support work from home
- Better access to mental health support
- Willingness to implement a mandatory anti-racism, anti-oppression training, and willingness to engage external facilitators to support dialogue between staff and leadership.
- Permission to take extended medical leave
- Freeze on new incoming work

The group also named feeling disheartened that very few of the recommendations outlined in the first report had been implemented to date. The group expressed particular disappointment that its highest priority recommendation—that NWI engage a consultant around culture change—while supported by leadership, had to be shelved for funding reasons.

- **JULY 2020:** In July, Collective Care reached out to the board to request an independent investigation and to get clarity on NWI’s grievance process. The group received a response that reinforced the board’s then position that it was up to leadership to deal with staff concerns. The group then received a communication from leadership requesting that they protect the reputations of the laureates and the organization by not discussing the issues with partners or via social media. The collective resignation followed shortly thereafter.

It may be worth noting that while the latest round of conversations about the need for change started in at least late 2019, the breakdowns came to a head during the height of the pandemic, and while staff were working from home. Additionally, the May 2020 murder of George Floyd sparked societal outrage and an amplification of voices for social justice as never seen in recent years.

These added layers of stress may have weakened opportunities for leadership and board to focus on and repair the existing underlying situation—even as they worked hard to respond to the immediate pandemic and work from home crises.



# STAKEHOLDER DATA THEMES



*You have to be strong;  
you have to trust yourself  
that you can build a new  
country. You have to  
know that you have the  
ability to achieve your  
dream.*

**BLACK  
LIVES  
MATTER**

## We begin this section with a summary of what we learned from memos and conversations with members of Collective Care and from other current and former staff.

To protect privacy, we do not distinguish between the categories of women we spoke with unless that detail is pertinent to the comment.

We also want to be transparent: it was often difficult to listen to the stories and examples of harm the staff described. And, it was just as difficult to learn about the laureates' history of personal pain and suffering in service of uplifting non-violence, women-led sustainable change, and human rights. We hold empathy and compassion for ALL of the women, regardless of position, power, nationality, etc. We also believe that at times, some hurt people hurt people; all too often even the most dedicated changemakers can unconsciously resort to using "the master's tools to dismantle the master's house<sup>4</sup>," especially when the stakes feel high.

Finally, we note that although the comments and experiences shared are overwhelmingly negative, some staff and all of the alumni also shared positive experiences at NWI, including a former staff person of color, who said that NWI *"was much more concerned about the well being of employees than any organization I have worked for. We had retreats for our professional and personal development, cakes on our birthdays, days off after travelling for work. We always worked collaboratively in pursuit of common cause irrespective of our particular tasks. We made time to reflect on our work in order to incorporate lessons learned. I always had a voice; I was engaged and my opinions were listened to."*

4. Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1984.

## THEME 1: Toxic, Top-Down, Patriarchal Culture

- NWI experienced as a white woman led and centered organization also rooted in “old-school” white patriarchy. This meant that there seemed to be very little room for junior staff to discuss, share opinions, or voice disagreements
- Noticeable, oppressive power dynamics
- Toxic, hierarchical structure that perpetuated a sense of worship of and need to self-sacrifice for the laureates—often at the expense of staff well-being, and modeled intensely by NWI leadership
- Intense culture of hostile and paralyzing perfectionism
- Often frantic working environment of unsustainable campaign-style work, leading to a feeling of burnout among the small and already stretched staff
- Staff burnout with excess workload overall, including work that did not shift at the onset of the pandemic
- Lack of organizational infrastructure or systems left some staff feeling vulnerable, with no place to turn. This also meant that there were no real checks and balances on leadership
- Lack of accountability for the board and the leadership, indicating to staff that voiced/raised concerns would never be taken seriously or repaired
- What felt to some staff as dismissiveness of personal life and issues
- Actions and decisions that made some feel that women of color were tokenized
- Lack of cultural sensitivity and considerations
- Conflicting feelings about and among remaining staff, regarding meaning and accountability for what happened, and because they stayed

## THEME 2: Emotional, Psychological, and Racially-Charged Harm to Staff

- Most of the women described seeing and/or observing severe emotional, and mental harm and distress; several women mentioned needing/wanting therapy and time to recover
- Most of the women spoke of a sense of deep inadequacy—both while at NWI and where they landed next—following what they describe as years of berating, belittling, and gas-lighting
- Glaring racial disparities in how women were treated; for example, for many years in NWI’s history, the only staff with full-time stable positions were white women
- Some alumni named feeling dismissed by staff, and especially by leadership, even in the midst of other very positive experiences, including connection with other program participants
- Harms from **LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS STYLE** seem to have been particularly pervasive. These include what the women described as:
  - Verbal assault and abuse
  - Public humiliation
  - Micromanaging
  - Work performance issues attributed to personal characteristics (one woman of color was asked by a staff member, “*Do you have a learning disability?*”)
  - Inconsistent and unclear requests that frequently resulted in blame or berating
  - Feedback delivered in a way that made some staff feel demeaned
- Insufficient emotional support to women who were experiencing vicarious trauma from heartbreaking, often first-hand stories of women and communities NWI sought to support

### THEME 3: Constant Job / Pay Insecurity

- Treatment at NWI felt racialized, with women of color (and white women who witnessed) reporting that women of color were often treated more poorly, publicly shamed more. One woman of color was falsely accused of stealing by her manager
- Distinct sense among employees that they were dispensable (e.g., contracts not being renewed until the last minute, people being fired for voicing discomfort, etc.) and not valued for their work, contributions, or time
- Consultants held on loose contracts; some would not know until the last minute if their contracts would be renewed
- No direct conversation between the board and the staff—initially due to board refusal—and no clarity, resolution, or apology (something both sides think they deserve). Confusion about the facts, details, and pervasiveness of the issues linger, along with resentment, pain, and anger—on all sides

### THEME 4: Weak Infrastructure

- Leadership was seen at times, even by the board, to be inexperienced in some critical leadership functions, as well as not as accomplished in the administrative aspects of the role
- Significant amounts of work held by unpaid interns
  - This often did not fully consider intern-level experience or the emotional impact of the more charged work (especially delegation work, where staff generally had to hold a lot of stories of trauma experienced by women in the local communities)
- Lack of clarity on roles, responsibilities, and expectations that led to confusion and harmful reactions toward staff

## THEME 5: Inconsistent & Conflicting Board / Leadership Values

- Clear tension between the approach of NWI's orientation to peacebuilding and human rights work, and its approach with the women it brings on to support that work
  - Several women described a deep struggle with the dissonance between NWI's mission and values of promoting peace (esp. for women), and its internal culture and values
- Some women reported that white women at NWI have said things to suggest that the activists on the ground "didn't know what they needed" and therefore didn't need to be included in discussions/decision-making
  - This led to a distinct sense among staff that these activists were sometimes being used or tokenized, and were not seen as genuine partners in the work in the eyes of the leadership and the laureates
  - Hierarchy and worship of the laureates helped to create a false narrative of NWI as the experts in the room, regardless of the country in which NWI was supporting on the ground work
    - NWI was experienced by some as not supporting agency and voice of the very women, organizations, and communities on the ground that NWI is trying to uplift
    - A few stakeholders expressed concern that NWI might more be serving as an opportunity for laureates to promote causes they care about, without doing much of the actual leg-work
  - Consequences of these disconnects include:
    - Some loss of respect and reputation in the sector (at least among these women and their potential networks)
    - Loss of qualified and passionate staff
    - Legal, financial, and emotional fallout
    - Potential reputational harm to the laureates and their work (more so because of the lack of response and belief)
    - Gaps in work and advocacy because of the loss of NWI staff
    - A few women noting that after NWI, they had no desire to work in the nonprofit sector ever again

We close this section noting that a former director has repeatedly acknowledged that pain and harm took place under her leadership, as a result of behaviors and actions that were not conducive to a healthy culture. She has also acknowledged her significant race/class privilege and power dynamics that were at play. This leader has begun the work of examining what went wrong and her role in it. This is a good start, and essential for building a road for repair. And, as we discuss more later in this report, this self-reckoning must go much deeper, and must radiate out to the board and external stakeholders who have been unintentionally complicit.

Furthermore, we believe that all recognition of harms and corresponding reckoning must be matched by:

1. Reparative action
2. Humility, and
3. A clearing of the path, so that those most connected to the problems have an active role in setting NWI's strategic direction and resolution.



# RECKONING



*It is time to stand up, sisters, and do some of the most unthinkable things. We have the power to turn our upside down world right.*



WE  
Rise  
UP

RIBOS

EM  
EM

**Around the world, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and broader social sector organizations are experiencing sharp thrusts forward.**

New and other workers, especially Millennials, are demanding more equitable and liberatory standards in how they are treated and engaged in the workplace, and their impact on the issues and causes they believe in.

This push has called for a reckoning with NGO/social sector leaders, funders, partners, and peers. To achieve their purpose, organizations and teams must do the work of dismantling personal, professional, sectoral, and societal biases and norms that have historically marginalized certain groups—often Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)—while benefiting others—often white people and those who conform to dominant white culture.

The tension between existing “old school,” top-down, paternalistic leadership and increasing calls for more collaborative, inclusive leadership becomes even more complex with the overlay of identity. The spectrum of race/ethnicity, gender expression, ability, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, immigrant status—and their many intersections—is being centered and uplifted in the internal operations of NGO/social sector work as never before. Additionally, we are seeing that inter-generational differences in perspective and approach—for all of their opportunity for knowledge transfer and innovation—can be another source of deep tension in the workplace.

However, we believe that if done well, and with intention, the push for change can help right-size a sector that has been as known for inequities and unjust impacts among some frontline, LGBTQIA, immigrant, women, and BIPOC staff as for intentions toward social change and societal benefit.

NWI is not the first organization, and will not be the last, to undergo a season of reckoning and transformation <sup>5</sup>. Other women-focused organizations, other human rights and peace organizations, and many, many others in the social sector are coming to terms with a workforce that is demanding a loftier alignment of mission, purpose, freedom, mobility, and respect in the workplace. Still, this does not relieve NWI of its responsibility to embrace this learning moment (and early signs suggest that overall, the laureates, to their credit, have started that work).

We offer below a summary of observations that illuminate the ways in which old school, top-down, paternalistic leadership may have been showing up at NWI. In the next section of this report, we share recommendations to help NWI advance toward more collaborative, inclusive leadership and aligned organizational approaches.

See <https://iwhc.org/press-releases/iwhc-board-statement-regarding-independent-reviews/> and <https://womendeliver.org/commitment-to-anti-racism/> as examples of other reviews and commitments to change.

## Leadership Grounded in White Dominant / White Supremacy Culture

We almost avoided the term “white supremacy” because it is such a trigger for many (often due to misunderstanding of the term), and because we do not want the term to upend readers’ ability to continue to digest and reflect on the harms to the women of NWI. Yet, we must call a thing a thing, and so first, we name and define the fretful term to clarify its meaning:

“White supremacy culture is the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of groups...teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value. It teaches us that Blackness is not only valueless but also dangerous and threatening. It teaches us that Indigenous people and communities no longer exist, or if they do, they are to be exoticized and romanticized or culturally appropriated as we continue to violate treaties, land rights, and humanity. It teaches us that people south of the border are “illegal.” It teaches us that Arabs are Muslim and that Muslim is “terrorist.” It teaches us that people of Chinese and Japanese descent are both indistinguishable and threatening as the reason for Covid. It pits other races and racial groups against each other while always defining them as inferior to the white group <sup>6</sup>.”

In her groundbreaking, collaborative work to identify the characteristics of white supremacy culture, Tema Okun further states,

“White supremacy culture is inextricably linked to all the other oppressions - capitalism, sexism, class and gender oppression, ableism, ageism, Christian hegemony - these and more are all interconnected and intersected and stirred together in a toxic brew that is reflected in our devastation of the air and water and land and living beings we have and are destroying and disregarding in the name of profit and power. This brew is a cancer, a dis-ease, an addiction, an infliction and it infects everything with and without our awareness <sup>7</sup>.”

6. Tema Okun. White Supremacy Culture. <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/what-is-it.html>.

7. <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>

Some of the ways in which this showed up at NWI can be characterized as Okun describes <sup>8</sup>:

**1. Perfectionism / Paternalism / One Right Way**

The belief there is one right way to do things. Connected to the belief in an objective "perfect" that is both attainable and desirable for everyone. Connected to the belief that I am qualified to know what the perfect right way is for myself and others.

**2. Denial & Defensiveness**

The habit of denying and defending against the ways in which white supremacy and racism are produced and our individual or collective participation in that production.

**3. Right To Comfort & Fear Of Conflict**

The internalization that I or we have a right to comfort, which means we cannot tolerate conflict, particularly open conflict.

**4. Urgency**

Applying the urgency of racial and social justice to our everyday lives in ways that perpetuate power imbalance and disregard for our need to breathe and pause and reflect.

Furthermore, we believe that this adherence to white dominant norms was reinforced by various stakeholders, even if unwittingly:

- Some, including funders and board members, said that they were unaware of the details of what happened. This seemed almost willingly so, given that there were ample data points about the circumstances (including the publicly-posted words of the 7 members of Collective Care and support from 34 other former employees), and opportunities to ask for more details.
- A lack of transparency from NWI; resistance and unwillingness of the board to believe that the problem was as deep and as pervasive as it was; and unconditional, almost unquestioning, support for the leadership *even as leadership admitted to causing harm*. These blind spots were further evidenced by a decision to allow this leader to continue working with donors after her resignation, as if extreme turmoil had not just occurred.
- Comfort in paying an external consultant rather than uplifting and investing in the people who name the problems in the first place.

## Questions About NWI's Purpose / Need for Refresh

While most stakeholders agree that having the laureates bring attention to an issue greatly increases exposure and support of that issue, most also shared a belief that NWI should not continue in its current iteration. The most obvious and recurring reflections were around the internal absence of feminist-grounded values and principles at NWI—in direct conflict with NWI's stated purpose. We wondered if the very real trauma and harm that some of the laureates and leadership have faced in doing this work translated into unintended/unrecognized harm on staff, coupled with a deep discounting of that harm because it did not meet a certain threshold.

NWI could greatly benefit from a pause, to reset and refresh on its purpose, approaches, and authentic internal/external alignment, along with the infrastructure, governance, and leadership needed to sustain it.

## Questions for the Broader Field

These issues, sadly, are not unique to NWI, and we believe there are larger questions here for the field, such as

- How do we stop “generational trauma” within the field of human rights?
- How do we reckon specifically with patriarchy, racism, anti-Blackness, oppression, classism, and elitism in the field; i.e.,
  - Who is organizational leadership? What does that say about organizational alignment to mission?
  - Who are other major decision-makers? What systems and structures helped forge their path to authority?
  - Who is “on the ground” and on the frontlines? How are their voices, perspectives, and expertise elevated and honored?
  - Who holds funding? What is funded (e.g., restricted—and restrictive—programming funds versus general operating funds that signal trust and support for the essential non-programmatic needs of any operation)?
  - Who has lived experience? Where are they in setting strategic direction?
- How do we interrupt parallel tendencies to treat communities served as “in-need” while simultaneously dismissing, ignoring, and otherwise harming individuals who represent those communities internally?



# REPAIR



*Only together can we  
move forward, so that  
there is light and hope for  
all women on the planet.*

L E E

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F E M I N I S T

A D L

A

## We offer the following set of recommendations to support NWI's realignment and clarification of purpose:

1. **Believe the women.**
2. **Be genuine, accountable, and transparent about mistakes made and harms caused before, during, and after the Collective Care resignation.**
  - Take responsibility privately with the women
  - Take responsibility publicly with the broader community
  - Be genuine in reporting to funders and partners
  - Undergo a broadly inclusive process of refreshing the NWI's theory of change to clarify the organization's pathway to change, and to align values, culture, value proposition
3. **Fund and provide multi-dimensional healing and repair**, to be defined by the women who have been harmed.
4. **Cease active engagement with former staff leadership**, and instead offer learning and development support around power, privilege, and corresponding behaviors, as well as support for former leadership's healing and repair.
5. **Review, and then restructure, NWI's current model of governance.**
  - Conduct an intensive board review of existing structures, norms to clarify the logic of the board's response to the women
  - Recognize, honor, and transition the laureates to "luminary" or advisory roles for example
  - Shift to a working board with formal governance structure including terms, committees, annual reviews of board performance, etc etc.
    - This shift should be facilitated by a consultant who can also provide board training and periodic assessments of progress
  - Ensure that the new board reflects the community NWI seeks to serve, and is inclusive across dimensions of identity and lived experience

- 6. Establish a set of core organizational values and co-design desired organizational culture.**
  - Ensure that these include elements of compassion, anti-racism/anti-oppression, and a trauma informed approach
  - Implement measures to ensure that these are operationalized throughout the organization
  
- 7. Ensure that the infrastructure reflects NWI's value proposition (its promise to internal and external stakeholders) and its core values**
  - Conduct a screen of programs/offering model to identify the most sustainable methods for achieving desired outcomes; the pressures of being in constant "campaign mode" may actually foster an environment of toxicity
  
- 8. Set values-based performance expectations for staff.**
  - Develop standards for expected performance and ensure that a system for anti-oppressive performance evaluations are put in place
  - Ensure that all recruitment materials and processes reflect these expected performance standards
  - Have a protocol in place for corrective actions, including termination, for any unresolved misalignment of behaviors
  
- 9. Mandate annual training on and demonstration of anti-oppression, anti-racism, trauma/vicarious trauma, and non-violent communications for all board and staff, including consultants, interns and part-time workers.**
  - Provide coaching for staff who remain to help them develop a deep understanding about anti-racism and anti-oppression to reset performance and behavioral expectations
  
- 10. Examine, name, and dismantle harmful throughlines in organizational norms grounded in patriarchy, white supremacy, white fragility, economic privilege, racism, anti-Blackness, and all other identity-based 'isms' and their many intersectionalities <sup>9</sup>.**

9. Kimberle Crenshaw used the term 'intersectionality' to show how oppressive structures such as racism, classism, and sexism are inseparable from people's identities and experiences. She further describes 'intersectional feminism' as "a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other."  
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters>

- 11. Conduct an organizational audit of documented policies and practices, as well as unspoken but expected norms and practices.**
  - Review and overhaul or create clear compensation policies and salary bands
  - Restructure the intern program to ensure compliance with labor laws and to institute balance and fairness in compensation for work
  - Define a plan of action for corrections and modifications that reflect the values and desired culture of NWI, as well as principles of anti-racism and anti-oppression
  - Rethink the marketing praxis for organization-specific news
    - create a more tailored approach for information distribution
    - ensure that what is said is meant and can be demonstrated as true
    - ensure that there is a clear “why” and purpose for information shared
    - be open and honest
- 12. Establish and enforce a framework of leadership accountability, including periodic performance reviews that include input from staff across various measures.**
- 13. Embrace the spirit of the “womanist<sup>10</sup>” approach to ensure inclusivity across ethnicity, nationality, ability, and to reduce harms caused by traditional Western white feminism.**
- 14. Ensure that the voices of women of color / activists on the ground consistently inform and guide the work of NWI, instead of the other way round.**
- 15. Share transparently and broadly about what the organization has learned to model and encourage organizational vulnerability, humility, learning, and transformative leadership within the field.**

10. “Author and poet Alice Walker defined “womanist” to be a Black feminist or feminist of color...(an exhibition of) willful, courageous, and outrageous behavior that is considered to be beyond the scope of societal norms. She goes on to say that a womanist is also a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility ... and women’s strength. ... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health ... Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit ... Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Womanism>



# STAKEHOLDER QUOTES



**We share below select quotes from stakeholders. These are meant to help illuminate perspective and stance. Our hope is that these will help to authenticate the experiences shared and provide food for thought as NWI considers its next steps.**

### **From Former Staff (including some members of Collective Care)**

- *“The leadership was much more concerned about the well-being of employees than any organization I have worked for. ..We made time to reflect on our work in order to incorporate lessons learned. I always had a voice; I was engaged and my opinions were listened to.”*
- *“We were there to help [the laureates] achieve their mission and incredible vision....had a ‘just suck it up and work harder’ attitude. The laureates were on a pedestal.”*
- *“I felt grounded in peace and human rights and really embraced the mode of naming and shaming in the work (before NWI)”*
- *“The laureates are taking responsibility and clarifying a vision for moving forward.”*
- *“Especially in the beginning, there was a willingness to make changes.”*
- *“There is pressure to be “perfect,” and you’re permanently in a sprint.”*
- *“I felt vulnerable all the time.”*
- *“I became a target early because I was the youngest and the newest.”*
- *“It was easier for the organization to discard people than to fix problems.”*
- *“The people who stuck around or had permanent jobs were all white women.”*

- *“...personality and communication style aggressive and hostile. Feels like you need to be on guard at all times.”*
- *“Over the few years I worked at NWI, my physical, mental, and emotional health deteriorated.”*
- *“It was like an abusive relationship.”*
- *“The [Board are] so far removed.”*
- *“...has this pattern where she can come on like a sledgehammer, realizes, and then [tries to make up for it].“*
- *“This organization is a brutal reality of the patriarchy; we’re trying to break the system of patriarchy in our work but perpetrating it within.”*
- *“...work well with people who show confidence; they don’t like any sign of weakness.”*
- *“Self sacrifice for the cause...built a culture of “perfectionism and over-working.”*
- *“The organization is so good at movement building and network building.”*
- *“[Leadership and board] tried to be empathetic. They did agree that a lot of the stuff was problematic, and said that they needed folks to offer solutions. People felt that they were being asked to do more emotional and physical labor.”*

## About the Value/Future of NWI:

Overwhelmingly, the work of NWI is seen as valuable by program participants, partners, and funders. The laureates' celebrity has been beneficial in bringing awareness to women-led feminist peace issues. At the same time, there were questions about the organization's present value and future direction.

- *"NWI's priority has been peace; a loud speaker for those who are denied a voice"*
- *"Would be happy if they embark seriously on the renewal journey and shift how they are working with us...share the experience openly and transparently. Use their failures so others can learn."*
- *[The organization] needs to be more inclusive and diverse and not only consist of women who are on a pedestal."*
- *"What is it going to take for the women to feel like they have a sense of justice? Why weren't they given the opportunity to talk to the board?"*
- *"NWI needs NWI's strong voices against injustice, tyranny, corruption and we as women should not be just for women and women's rights."*
- *It's important in such conflict and crisis to reconstruct what happened and take the time necessary to land at a shared understanding of what happened*
- *Understanding the crisis is partly systemic across the sector.*
- *"How do you create space to process emotion and allow folks to come in as flawed humans?"*
- *"Not a lot of value in issue-to-issue jumping with no long-term strategy."*
- *"These women need a bit of an anti-racist lens... Maybe the diversity is there, but is there equity, is there inclusion? Probably not."*
- *"It's really difficult to talk to you, because I don't believe they're going to do anything with this."*
- *"Does [NWI] serve the interests of the laureates, or does it serve women in movements around the world?"*
- *"[A strong] team has to have experts - international relations, social work, strong public relations, law graduates, lawyers, fundraiser"*
- *"The organization needs management and execution [that reflects] our strong voices"*
- *"The leadership and culture comes from the board. They need to decide their role and the foundation of a culture that would protect the organization and its people from replicating the same things."*
- *"From a strategic perspective, they bring the voice. The experience and prestige can really help amplify an issue."*

## Partners

- *NWI legitimized women's issue in the eyes of media and the eyes of gov't at a time when women were not recognized."*
- *"There is trust and respect at NWI and they clearly value you."*
- *"If I need something, I know where to go. That's what I mean by solidarity. I feel like I am someone, and I am appreciated."*
- *"I still feel the importance of the organization—it has to remain on its feet."*
- *"NWI needs new blood, new vision, new structure and to represent to the world that what happened can happen to any organization."*
- *"...not always conscious of the relationships in movement building and institutionalizing—created tension around identity."*
- *"Remind folks that in processing these kinds of events invite us to bring our whole self to the space and bring our feelings to this and grounding in perception."*
- *"What is it going to take for the women to feel like they have a sense of justice? Why weren't they given the opportunity to talk to the board?"*
- *"[We want] to keep counting on NWI."*

## Funders/Funding

- *"We appreciate the way to laureates use their notoriety to amplify the voices of women activists on the ground"*
- *"We were stunned and didn't know it was going on."*
- *"If you come up with a solution (for the women) then we'll fund it."*
- *"Laureates were not born as laureates; they gained notoriety from being supported by the community - they remember who they are and that fuels their drive to bring other women in that way."*
- *"These are important movements that took years to get to. Can't just hashtag and dismiss"*
- *"...understand that is a sector issue—racism, hierarchy, leadership..."*
- *"I have blind spots."*
- *"We're all in this movement together"*

## From Board

- *“..don’t think [she] is the type of person that would discriminate against people of color, and I don’t see it.”*
- *“...we are not the ED.”*
- *“Priority has been peace.”*
- *“The way they expected the environment of the workplace is not what they wanted - workers were unhappy.”*
- *“I don’t see that’s harm in any way.”*
- *“Laureates shouldn't be involved directly in NWI.”*
- *“Administration and execution should work for us - similar to assistant emails, statements, advising.”*
- *“Nobel Laureates support democracy and good governance and support women to be active in the world.”*

## From Alumni

- *“The sisterhood was one of the most valuable experiences.”*
- *“One of the things that stood out for me was the network and connections that NWI has and connecting us with the Canadian parliament in Ottawa and NY.”*
- *“There was a moment where I thought, does this have to do with us being Black?”*
- *Was sad to hear what happened with the program because it was a great program, but it also wasn't a shock to hear that it had happened.”*
- *“Felt that I somehow lost a little bit of power over my destiny and my ways through the schedule of the program.”*
- *“There were times where I felt I didn't have power over me.”*
- *“We are still living most of our stories...it can be very exhausting day after day to talk about the tension and turmoil and difficulties in home countries.”*
- *“I would definitely recommend the program”*
- *“You find energy from having meetings and participating in conferences. You gain skills and information. It’s great to have the program to expand those.”*



# CLOSING



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We appreciate Jody Williams, the NWI board chair, for her initial outreach to CRE, honest sharing about the circumstances of our proposed engagement, and availability throughout the process.

We thank Tania Principe, NWI's interim executive director, for her consistent and thoughtful partnership. We thank all of the stakeholders who agreed to speak with us; overwhelmingly, they showed up to conversations with willingness to be transparent with us.

We thank each of the laureates for their openness to take in the data differently than before, and for their swift demonstration of commitment to take responsibility, be accountable, and find ways to repair. This is the essence of bold leadership.

We thank the women who saw and experienced a problem, said something, demanded action, took a stance. We thank those who stood in support of them. We honor and acknowledge women and others in all NGO/social sector organizations who feel oppressed, or see it, and say and do something. This is the catalyst for change.

# ABOUT CRE's OWN (ONGOING) JOURNEY

This was an important engagement for our team, juxtaposing our professional and organizational values with NWI's highly-aligned mission and purpose. CRE has been on its own journey toward anti-racism and anti-oppression for the past five years. We recognize how hard it is to consistently actualize commitment to organizational values, a healthy culture, collaborative leadership, and equity across all elements of identity.

We deeply understand the harm—to people, teams, organizations, and the work itself—that too frequently triggers the decision to embark on such a journey. We have experienced how bias, privilege, and resistance can cause further breakdowns during the journey, leaving residual damage.

We also know for sure that it is only through courageous and intentional efforts to name, call in/out, and have difficult conversations that change happens. We have seen first-hand the transformation that can manifest when we bravely shine a light on moments of falter.

What has buoyed us, and what we hope for the Nobel Women's Initiative, is a mandate to do the work no matter what. This means our individual and collective work to learn and unlearn; and, to dismantle inequitable and oppressive norms, policies, and systems in favor of those that include and welcome rather than exclude and tear down. The work is not easy, but it is necessary. And it must start at the top. See CRE's report on our journey [here](#).

We wish NWI, and all of the NWI women, a strong sense of healing, well-being, and personal achievement as NWI moves toward a refreshed and more authentically aligned purpose and promise to its stakeholders.

