



Rooted in Practice:

Anti-Oppressive Discussion Guide

From Policy to Practice: Discussion Guide a companion resource for
Leadership Teams to accompany the Rooted in Practice: Reimagining
Healing through Anti-Oppression and Embodied Practice Guidebook



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How to Use This Discussion Guide

This discussion guide is a companion resource to ***Rooted in Practice: Reimagining Healing through Anti-Oppression and Embodied Practice***. The Guidebook explores how sexual and gender-based violence is connected to broader systems of oppression, power, and control, and what it can mean to bring anti-oppressive practice into service delivery, organizational culture, advocacy, relationship-building, and systems change.

This guide is intended to support leadership teams in reflecting on how anti-oppressive commitments are being put into practice within their organizations. While many organizations in the anti-violence and non-profit sectors have policies, values statements, strategic priorities, or public language related to anti-oppression, anti-racism, equity, accessibility, cultural safety, survivor-centred practice, reconciliation, trauma-informed practice, gender diversity, or inclusion. These commitments help name what an organization values and what it hopes to be accountable to. At the same time, **commitments can become disconnected from practice when they are not clearly implemented, resourced, revisited, or embedded into everyday decision-making**. A policy may name an important value, but without a clear implementation plan, teams are still left without the tools, time, or guidance to act on that value consistently. A strategic plan may commit to anti-oppression, while operational decisions continue to be shaped by urgency, risk management, funder requirements, limited resources, or long-standing ways of working.

The purpose of this guide is not to assess whether an organization has “good” or “bad” policies. Rather, **it is intended to help leadership teams slow down and ask: What have we committed to? What does that commitment mean in practice? It will help ask questions like:** Where is this commitment already alive in our work?

Where do practices still need to be strengthened? What conditions would make this commitment easier to implement? What can we move forward over the next three months?

This guide can be used in a leadership meeting, management retreat, board-leadership discussion, strategic planning session, or community of practice for leaders. It is designed to support honest reflection and practical movement. Organizations may choose to focus on one existing policy, value statement, strategic priority, or area of practice. If an organization does not yet have a formal anti-oppression policy or commitment, the guide can also be used to begin naming what such a commitment might need to include.

Addressing Anti-Oppression Collectively

In anti-gender-based violence work, there is often an understandable pull toward urgency. Organizations are frequently responding to immediate needs, limited resources, long waitlists, complex harm, and changing community realities. It can be difficult to create time and space to examine the larger systems that shape both violence and service responses. However, without opportunities to critically examine practice, organizations can unintentionally reproduce the very harms they are trying to address. A discussion-based approach creates space to ask harder questions.

This guide is also intended to support a shift from **individual responsibility to shared responsibility**. Anti-oppressive practice cannot rest only on the goodwill or insight of individual workers. It needs to be supported through leadership decisions, team dialogue, organizational culture, policies, partnerships, resource allocation, and advocacy. For this reason, the discussion questions invite participants to consider how anti-oppressive commitments can be strengthened at multiple levels: in day-to-day practice, in organizational systems, and in the broader sector.

Who is this guide intended for?

This discussion guide is publicly accessible and is intended for use by **leaders, management staff, board members, and others with decision-making responsibility in organizations** across the anti-violence and non-profit sectors. It can be used during formal or informal leadership learning spaces, including leadership team meetings, retreats, board-staff discussions, or organizational and strategic planning sessions.

Readers are encouraged to adapt the guide to their context while maintaining the spirit of the resource. This may include adjusting the timeline, choosing a narrower or broader focus, pairing the discussion with a case study, or using organizational documents that are most relevant to the team's current priorities.

Creating a Reflective Discussion Space

Before using this guide, participants are encouraged to review **Section III: Anti-Oppression (specifically, “What is anti-oppressive practice?”)** and **Section IV: Next Steps (specifically, “How can you implement anti-oppressive practice?”)** of the Guidebook. These sections offer important grounding for thinking about what anti-oppressive practice can look like in front-line service provision, organizational culture, advocacy, relationship-building, and collective action.

The Guidebook addresses topics such as sexual and gender-based violence, oppression, trauma, racism, colonialism, state violence, patriarchy, cisheterosexism, and other forms of harm. Discussions may bring up discomfort, grief, defensiveness, or other strong emotions. Before beginning, facilitators are encouraged to create a clear and supportive environment and establish shared expectations for discussion.

This can include starting by naming the purpose of the conversation and reminding participants that the goal is not to reach perfect agreement, but to engage honestly, reflectively, and respectfully. It may also be helpful to acknowledge that no organization can address every issue at once. Part of the work is naming what is within the organization's control, what requires partnership or advocacy, and what may need to be revisited over time.

Facilitators may wish to establish a few shared agreements with the group, such as listening with care, speaking from one's own experience, making space for different levels of knowledge, noticing defensiveness, avoiding debate about people's lived experiences, and staying open to being challenged.

Facilitators can also support participation by offering multiple ways to engage. Participants may be invited to reflect quietly before speaking, write down thoughts before sharing, discuss in pairs or small groups, or pass on a question if they need more time. This can help avoid putting people on the spot, especially when the discussion touches on identity, power, harm, or personal experience.

At the same time, creating a supportive space does not mean avoiding discomfort. Anti-oppressive learning often involves noticing assumptions, sitting with tension, and being willing to examine how harm can be reproduced even when intentions are good. Leadership teams can help hold this balance by acknowledging that discomfort may arise, while bringing the group back to reflection, accountability, and practice.

Facilitator Note:

Before using this guide, participants are encouraged to review **Section III: Anti-Oppression (specifically, "What is anti-oppressive practice?")** and **Section IV: Next Steps (specifically, "How can you implement anti-oppressive practice?")** of the Guidebook. These sections offer important grounding for thinking about what anti-oppressive practice can look like in front-line service provision, organizational culture, advocacy, relationship-building, and collective action.

For example, shared agreements might include:

- Speak from your own experience rather than speaking on behalf of a whole community.
- Listen to understand, not to prepare a response.
- Make space for different levels of familiarity with anti-oppressive language and concepts.
- Notice defensiveness, urgency, or the desire to “move on” when discomfort arises.
- Do not debate or minimize people’s lived experiences.
- Use de-identified examples when discussing practice, clients, colleagues, or organizations.
- Expect that not every question will be resolved today; the goal is reflection, learning, and accountability.

A grounding or check-in question could be as simple as:

- What is one word that describes how you are arriving today?
- What is one hope you have for this conversation, and one thing you may need in order to participate thoughtfully?

Key Concepts from the Guidebook

The following concepts are included to support shared grounding before participants move into the discussion activities. These are not intended to replace the fuller discussion in the Guidebook.

Facilitator Note: You may choose which definitions are most relevant to the conversation.

What is Oppression?

Oppression refers to systemic patterns of mistreatment and unequal power that restricts people's access to safety, dignity, rights, resources, opportunities, and belonging. Oppression is not only expressed through individual prejudice or harmful behaviour. It is also embedded in policies, institutions, professional norms, service systems, cultural narratives, and everyday practices.

In anti-violence work, this means that survivors' experiences of violence and support are shaped not only by the actions of the person who harmed them, but also by broader systems such as racism, colonialism, patriarchy, cisheterosexism, ableism, classism, and state violence, which can manifest through immigration systems, policing, child welfare, housing systems, and health care.

What is Anti-oppression?

Anti-oppression is an active approach to recognizing, challenging, and transforming the systems, assumptions, practices, and power dynamics that reproduce harm. It requires more than being inclusive or respectful at the interpersonal level. It also involves examining how organizations, institutions, and broader systems may create barriers, reinforce unequal power, or define safety in ways that do not work for all survivors.

In organizational practice, anti-oppression may involve asking different questions about how decisions are made, who holds power, what is resourced, whose knowledge is centred, how policies are implemented, how accountability is practiced, and where organizational or sector-level change is needed.

Other concepts from the Guidebook, including power and control, intersectionality, and structural and state violence, may also be helpful when working through the activities. Brief definitions of these terms are included in Appendix A.

Preparing for the Initial Discussion

The person facilitating the discussion may wish to bring two or three organizational documents to the conversation. These might include formal policies, strategic plans, values statements, equity frameworks, service delivery guidelines, accessibility plans, hiring practices, partnership principles, or public-facing statements.

Organizations do not need to have a document titled “anti-oppression policy” to use this guide. For the purpose of this discussion, anti-oppressive commitments can include any formal or informal commitment the organization has made to reduce harm, address inequity, strengthen access, support dignity, and respond to the different ways survivors, staff, and communities experience safety and care.

Examples may include commitments related to:

- Anti-oppression
- Anti-racism
- Equity, diversity, and inclusion
- Accessibility
- Reconciliation
- Trans inclusion and gender diversity
- Language access
- Cultural safety
- Trauma-informed practice
- Survivor-centred practice
- Staff safety and workplace culture
- Complaints, accountability, or conflict resolution
- Hiring, promotion, and leadership development
- Data collection, evaluation, and reporting
- Partnerships with police, child welfare, health care, immigration, housing, or legal systems

Some organizations may have values or commitments that are not yet written into policy. Others may have strong written policies but limited implementation. Both are useful starting points for this activity.

Activity 1: Naming the Existing Commitments

The next several sections are designed as a structured reflection process for leadership teams. Together, they invite you to examine your organization's commitments to anti-oppression—not only the values and policies you have in place, but how those commitments are reflected in everyday practice. Each activity builds on the last, moving from identifying existing commitments, to examining policies, procedures, and organizational practices, to identifying concrete opportunities for change. You may choose to work through the activities in a single session or spread them across multiple meetings, allowing time to reflect, gather information, and revisit ideas as your discussion evolves.

Begin by identifying one anti-oppressive commitment that already exists within the organization. This may be a formal policy, a value statement, a strategic priority, a service principle, or an informal commitment that is often named in the work.

Discussion prompts

1. What anti-oppressive commitments has our organization made, formally or informally? These may include commitments related to anti-racism, equity, accessibility, cultural safety, survivor-centred practice, reconciliation, trans inclusion, language access, or other efforts to reduce harm and shift power in our work.
2. Where do these commitments live? For example, are they named in policies, strategic plans, public statements, staff training, supervision practices, service standards, board documents, or informal organizational norms?
3. Which commitments are most visible internally, such as to staff or board members?
4. Which commitments are most visible externally, such as to survivors, communities, funders, or partners?
5. Which commitments are less visible, less understood, or less consistently applied?
6. Are there commitments we refer to often but have not yet clearly defined?

7. Are there areas where we expect staff to practice in anti-oppressive ways, but have not clearly defined what that means or how to do it?

As a group, choose one policy, commitment, or value statement to focus on for the rest of the discussion.

Examples might include:

- “We are committed to providing culturally safe services.”
- “We are committed to anti-racist practice.”
- “We are committed to trans-inclusive services.”
- “We are committed to survivor-centred care.”
- “We recognize that safety looks different for different communities.”
- “We are committed to accessibility and inclusion.”
- “We are committed to reconciliation and relationship-building with Indigenous communities.”

Activity 2: What This Commitment Looks Like in Practice

Once the group has chosen a commitment, use the following questions to explore how that commitment is showing up in practice.

Selected commitment: _____

What does this commitment mean in practice?

1. What would or what does this commitment look like in everyday practice for staff, survivors, communities, or partners?
2. What would or what does this commitment require from leadership?
3. What would or what does this commitment require from the organization as a whole?

What is already working?

1. What are we already doing that reflects this commitment?

2. What are concrete examples of this commitment influencing a decision, process, service, or partnership?
 - a. Who is aware of these commitments?
 - b. Who is responsible for stewarding these commitments?
 - c. How and when are these commitments reviewed?
3. What existing processes, roles, partnerships, or resources support this commitment?
4. What has made implementation possible so far?

What needs to be strengthened?

1. Where is this commitment not yet being applied consistently?
2. What guidance, resources, or authority do staff need to apply this commitment in practice?
3. Are any current practices, forms, policies, or partnerships making this commitment harder to uphold?
4. Who is most affected when this commitment is not implemented well?

What could help move this forward?

1. What is one realistic step we could take over the next three months?
2. What would make that step useful for staff, survivors, or community partners?
3. What needs to be clarified, resourced, or decided before we can move forward?

What might get in the way?

1. What might make this commitment difficult to implement?
2. Which barriers are within our control?
3. Which barriers require partnership, advocacy, funding, or longer-term systems change?
4. Where might we experience resistance, defensiveness, uncertainty, or competing priorities? How can we address this when it comes up?
5. What might we need to stop doing, change, or resource differently?

Activity 3: Choosing a Focus for Action

Anti-oppressive implementation can feel overwhelming when leaders try to address everything at once. This activity asks the group to choose one area of focus that can be meaningfully advanced over the next three months.

Based on the discussion so far, identify possible areas of action that would help move the selected commitment further into practice.

Possible areas of action

An area of action might focus on:

- Clarifying the policy or commitment
- Revising a procedure or workflow
- Developing staff guidance
- Reviewing documentation practices
- Improving accessibility or language access
- Strengthening community partnerships
- Creating a survivor or community feedback process
- Reviewing hiring, promotion, or leadership pathways
- Building accountability mechanisms
- Reviewing how the organization works with police, child welfare, immigration, health care, housing, or legal systems
- Communicating expectations more clearly to staff, board members, partners, or funders

Discussion prompts

1. What are some possible areas of action that could strengthen this commitment?
2. Which areas are short-term, and which require longer-term work?
3. Which would have the most meaningful impact on survivors, staff, or communities?
4. Which are realistic given our current capacity?
5. Which require leadership decision-making?

6. Which require staff, survivor, community, board, partner, or funder input?

Possible areas of action:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Activity 4: Planning the Next Three Months

Anti-oppressive implementation can feel overwhelming when leaders try to address everything at once. This activity asks the group to choose one area of focus that can be meaningfully advanced over the next three months.

Choose one focus area that can be advanced over the next three months. This does not need to solve the entire issue. The goal is to identify a concrete step that moves the commitment closer to practice.

Selected three-month focus: _____

Refining the focus

1. Why this focus, now?
2. How does this focus translate anti-oppressive commitments into practice?
3. Who would benefit if this moved forward?
4. What would change in day-to-day practice if this were implemented well?
5. What is within our control over the next three months?
6. What is not within our control, but still needs to be considered?
7. Who needs to be involved? Who will take responsibility for leading this change over the next months? Who will be supporting?
8. What resources, information, or authority are needed?
9. What could get in the way?
10. How will we know whether we have made progress?

Three-month practice commitment

Planning question	Response
Focus / goal	
First step	
Who is responsible?	
Who needs to be consulted or involved?	
What support or resources are needed?	
What barriers do we anticipate?	
How will we respond to those barriers?	
What will progress look like in one month?	
What will progress look like in three months?	
How will we communicate progress to staff, the board, survivors, partners, or community members?	

Activity 5: Returning to the Commitment

Anti-oppressive implementation requires follow-through. This check-in is intended to help leaders revisit the commitment, assess progress honestly, identify barriers, and determine next steps. It may be useful to return to this discussion after approximately three months.

Check-in questions

1. What did we commit to doing?
2. What actions were taken?

3. What changed in practice, if anything?
4. What worked well?
5. What did we learn?
6. What barriers did we encounter?
7. Were the barriers expected or unexpected?
8. What were the barriers related to (capacity, resources, clarity, authority, resistance, competing priorities, external systems, role confusion, or something else)?
9. What does this tell us about the future implementation of anti-oppressive practice at our organization?
10. What should happen next?
11. Do we continue with this focus, revise it, expand it, or choose a new area of action?

Reflection on accountability

1. Who needs to know what progress has been made?
2. How can we communicate progress?
3. What remains unresolved?
4. What would it look like to stay accountable to this commitment over time?

Closing Reflection

Anti-oppressive policies and commitments are important, but they are only meaningful when they shape everyday practice, decision-making, resource allocation, partnerships, and accountability. Moving from policy to practice requires more than naming values. It requires leaders to ask what those values need in order to be put into practice, what conditions are needed to implement them, and what must change when practice does not yet match the commitment.

What is one anti-oppressive commitment we are willing to move from intention into action over the next three months, and what will we do differently because of this conversation?

Appendix A

Power & Control	Power and control are central to sexual and gender-based violence, but they do not only operate within individual relationships. Power and control can also show up in service systems, documentation practices, eligibility criteria, risk assessment tools, mandatory reporting processes, shelter policies, funding requirements, and assumptions about what survivors “should” do. An anti-oppressive approach asks workers to consider both how a perpetrator may be using power and control and how systems may unintentionally reproduce control over survivors’ choices, stories, bodies, families, identities, and pathways to safety.
Intersectionality	Intersectionality helps us understand how different systems of oppression overlap and shape people’s experiences in specific ways. A survivor’s experience of violence and service access may be shaped by gender, race, Indigeneity, immigration status, disability, poverty, sexuality, gender identity, language, age, criminalization, housing status, or past experiences with state systems. An intersectional approach does not treat one part of a survivor’s identity as the “main” issue while ignoring the others. Instead, it asks how multiple systems are operating together and how support can respond to the whole context of a survivor’s life.
Structural & State Violence	Structural violence refers to the ways social, political, and economic systems create harm by limiting access to resources, safety, health, housing, legal protection, and other conditions needed to live with dignity. State violence refers to harm caused or reinforced by state systems, including policing, immigration enforcement, child welfare, prisons, courts, involuntary mental health systems, and other institutions with the power to surveil, punish, remove, detain, or control people. In anti-violence work, these systems may sometimes be sources of protection, but they may also be sources of fear, harm



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