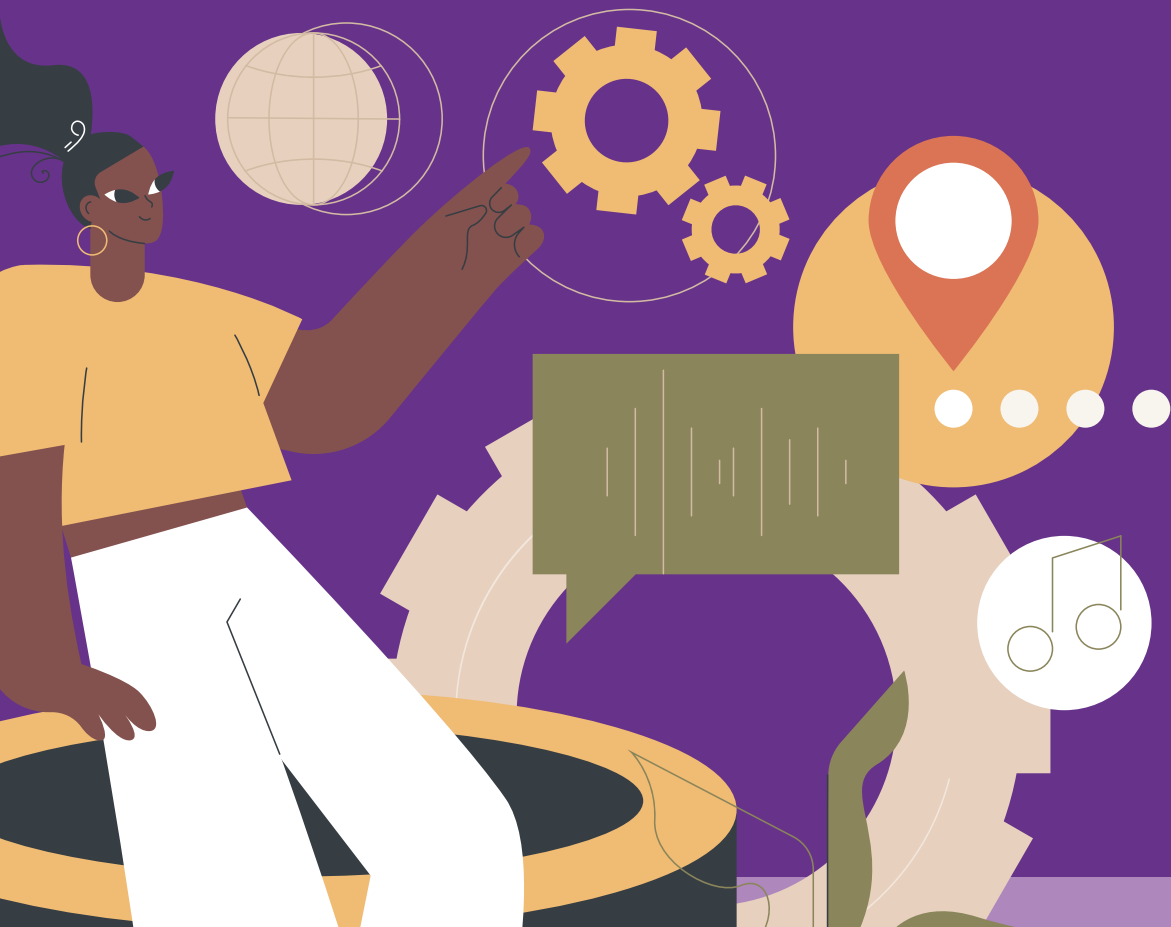


Strategic Partnerships for Institutional Change

A Framework For Organisations Working To Advance Women's Leadership In Law And Economics, Designed Not To Describe Partnership, But To Make It More Intentional.



Most organisations working on women's leadership already partner. The harder and more consequential question is whether those partnerships are designed to shift the systems that keep women out or simply to get more done.



About This Framework

This conceptual framework emerges from the work of the Co-Impact Women in Leadership Community of Practice (WiL CoP), a peer learning network that brings together organisations working on women's leadership in law and economics across India, Kenya, Latin America, South Africa, and Nigeria. Spanning the judiciary, academia, and law practice, CoP members are collectively navigating the challenge of shifting entrenched institutional structures together rather than placing the burden of change on individual women. The framework presented here draws on those shared experiences and is offered as a practical thinking tool for organisations doing similar work.

1. The Problem Is Structural, And So Must Be The Response

The persistent under-representation of women in the judiciary, in senior academic roles, and in law practice leadership is not, at its root, a problem of individual women. It is a problem of institutions, their formal rules, their informal cultures, the incentive structures they maintain, and the networks of power they reproduce.

This matters enormously for strategy. When the problem is located in women, in their confidence, their ambition, their networks, the response is training, mentorship, and role models. These interventions are not without value, but they leave the institutional structure intact and place the burden of change on those who are already

disadvantaged by it. When the problem is located in the institution, the response looks fundamentally different: it requires engaging the actors who hold institutional authority, aligning incentives, reforming policy, and shifting the norms that determine who is seen as a legitimate leader.

No single organisation can do this alone. Strategic partnerships are, therefore, not a supplement to this work; they are the mechanism through which institutional change becomes possible at all.



2. From Collaboration To Strategy: What Makes A Partnership Strategic

Collaboration is common. Strategic partnership is not. The distinction matters because organisations working on institutional change frequently find themselves in partnerships that consume significant time and goodwill without generating commensurate movement in the system. The difference lies not in the depth of the relationship but in whether the partnership is designed around a specific barrier in a specific system and whether it engages actors with real authority over that barrier.

A strategic partnership, as this framework defines it, has three essential characteristics. It is oriented toward a clearly identified system barrier, not a general commitment to shared values. It engages partners who hold influence over that barrier, not simply those who are sympathetic to the cause. And it is designed for a shared outcome that neither partner can achieve alone, not for mutual visibility or institutional convenience.

COLLABORATION		STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP
Activity-focused	→	Outcome-focused
Transactional exchange	→	Transformative alignment
Relationship as goal	→	Relationship as vehicle
Short-term engagement	→	Long-term change

This shift in orientation from “who can we partner with?” to “what barrier are we trying to shift, and who has leverage over it?” is the first and most important move the framework asks organisations to make.

3. Four Types Of Strategic Partnerships: A Framework

Institutional change does not happen through a single point of pressure. It requires sustained action across multiple dimensions of a system simultaneously. The framework below identifies four (4) partnership types, each addressing a different part of the institutional system.

The Four (4) Types Of Strategic Partnership

1. Partnerships with Leaders (The Foundation)

- Senior and influential leaders shape the direction, legitimacy, and pace of change.
- They move women's leadership from a "project" to a strategic priority.
- They signal that gender equality in leadership is core to institutional purpose and performance.
- They reduce resistance by anchoring change in authority and shared ownership.

2. Partnerships for Incentives, Policy, Accountability & Cultural Shift (The Pressure Points)

- These partners have the power to create formal systems to reward, require, and reinforce change by reforming policies, regulations, and institutional frameworks.
- These partners can hold institutions and leaders accountable for results.
- These partners either develop or strengthen data systems on women's leadership to track progress and expose gaps.

3. Partnerships for Cultural & Narrative Shifts & Collective Power (The Cultural Shift)

- These partners help change the unwritten rules about who leads and how leadership is valued.
- They have the influence to challenge deeply embedded gender norms, stereotypes, and assumptions.
- These partners build collective voice and legitimacy for women's leadership and create social and institutional pressure for change.
- These partners shift narratives from "fixing women" to transforming systems.

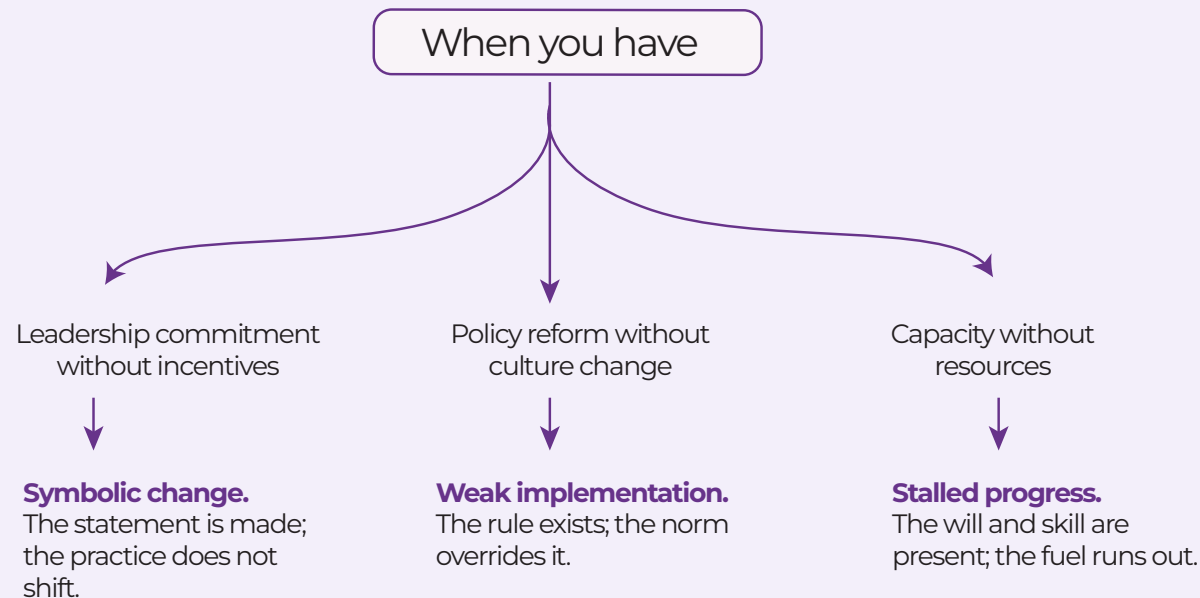
4. Partnerships to Build Capacity and Garner Resources (The Engine Room)

- These partners equip institutions and individuals with the skills, tools, and resources to act; they ensure change is operational, not just aspirational.
- These partners have the skills to embed learning, mentoring, and adaptive practice into institutions.
- These partners provide or enable the mobilisation of financial, technical, and human resources sustainably.

These four (4) types are not a menu from which organisations select a few favourites. Their collective logic is that institutional change requires both pressure and support, both formal authority and cultural permission. Partnerships which operate in only one cluster rarely generate durable change on their own.

4. Why Combinations Matter: The Failure Modes Of Partial Strategies

Understanding the four (4) types is useful. Understanding how they fail when deployed in isolation is more useful still. Three (3) failure modes recur across different country and sector contexts.



Effective institutional change strategy combines pressure, support, legitimacy, capacity, and cultural challenge not sequentially but in parallel. This does not require every partnership to operate across all four (4) types. It does require organisations to hold the full map in view, to know which dimensions their current portfolio addresses and which it leaves exposed, and to make deliberate choices about where to build new partnerships to address those gaps.

5. Implications For Practice

This framework is offered not as a checklist but as a diagnostic. It is most useful when organisations use it to audit their existing partnership portfolio. One should map current partnerships against the four types, identifying which failure modes they are most exposed to, and asking honestly whether their partnerships are designed to unlock power and shift incentives or primarily to amplify activity.

- 1. Start with the barrier, not the partner.** The most consequential shift in strategic orientation is to begin with a specific, named institutional barrier and work backwards to the partnership types and actors needed to address it. This should be done rather than beginning with available relationships and working forward to what they might accomplish together.
- 2. Prioritise actors with authority over the barrier.** Sympathetic partners are easier to engage, but they rarely hold the institutional levers that matter. Strategic partnerships often require the harder work of engaging actors with real decision-making power, including those who are not yet convinced.
- 3. Design your portfolio, not just your partnerships.** Individual partnerships are most powerful when they reinforce each other across clusters. The question to ask is not only 'Is this a strong partnership?' but 'Does this partnership address a gap in our systems approach?'
- 4. Hold a long view.** Institutional change is iterative, non-linear, and frequently slower than project timelines allow. Strategic partnerships need to be maintained through periods when visible progress is limited, which requires funders and practitioners alike to resist the pressure to demonstrate impact on short cycles.



Closing Provocation

Strategic partnerships aren't measured by how well we work together, but by whether we shift the systems shaping outcomes. For women's leadership in law and economics, partnerships aren't optional, the problem is too structural. The real test is intentionality: Are we leveraging all four clusters to move the institution, or just moving activity around within it?





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