

Reflecting on WE

-Mira Lyonblum

*Update: This is now being read by people who didn't come to it from my original posts. I understand and appreciate you taking the time, but I also want to make sure I include the note that I did on my post:

I've waited far too long to speak up about the enormous problems which plague WE, the organization with whom I worked for 5.5 years, and to advocate for change. While I've signed and shared the recent petitions, I've been hesitant for a lot of reasons to finally share my experiences, but I'm taking a breath and doing what I feel is right.

Far more important than my story, though, are the immediate issues which WE needs to address and change.

On Instagram, check out @antiracistwe which has links to updated information regarding the brave colleagues who are speaking out about their experiences with racist practices. Listen to them, uplift them, share the reach of their voices, and sign the [petition](#).

Original:

This is an account of my recollections of some of the practices that happened at WE/Me to We/Free the Children which point to a pattern of employee and program recipient exploitation, mismanagement, racism, homophobia, discrimination against mothers returning to work, and intimidation.

I worked for what is now called WE from February 2012 until July 2017, on the Leadership team. I've written versions of this note over and over again for the three years since I left WE. Actually, I wrote some of it while I worked there too. There are a lot of things that stopped me from finishing it (not that I think it's a finished piece now). I do think that the time is now to send it out though.

When I first heard that WE was tapped to distribute \$912M in funds to young people for 'volunteering,' I raged. First of all, the nature of this program itself is problematic and exploitative; people should be paid for their labour, and this is a short-sighted way to help young people, organizations in need of help, and the economy. Secondly, WE has mismanaged their programming for so long, and mistreated their employees in so many ways, that they absolutely should not be the ones in charge of this project. While that decision has been revoked, the organization still needs to be exposed. I've also been so inspired by my colleagues who are stepping forward with stories of their own regarding racism, exploitation, and other enormously problematic practices.

Calling someone out can be an act of both resistance and love. It means that we may want them to still be part of our community in a more meaningful way, that we believe they can reflect and change, and that they're worthy of knowing the impact of their actions so that they have a

chance to course correct. It also means that we respect and honour our community enough to let them know when someone else is doing harm, even if it may mean some backlash.

I unequivocally recognize and take ownership over my culpability in perpetuating this often-harmful culture. Far too often, I was swept up in the work and didn't notice the harm. Sometimes I questioned some piece but was convinced - both by myself and others - that the larger good we were doing outweighed the dubious parts.

Having managed my own projects, I know that many non-profits need to make tough choices, and if they want to receive much-needed funding they often have to compromise and choose between the lesser of two evils. In the last few years I've found myself swallowing hard and screwing up my eyes tightly while begging a corporation (that I would never buy from) for a pittance of funds in order to bring food security education and gardens to schools. The fact is, the way our system is set up means that we need non-profits and charities to address the enormous gaps in resources and services that governments have left. So much funding comes from governments or corporations, and the donor demands are often ridiculous. It's a really hard line to toe, and I don't think that anyone has it fully figured out.

However, being open about these issues is a critical step, ESPECIALLY if you have an enormous global reach and are influencing young people. When I worked for WE and wrote a module/program that looked at ethical decision-making and used real examples from our funders, I was told to change them to fictional companies and to not speak ill of our donors. That's not the way that we change the system; we need to respect our youth enough to be able to wrestle with these issues together. That's what made me so furious about the reporting from Canadaland about the unethical companies that WE works with. Of course I was upset that WE works with them in general, though much of that information is publicly available in some shape or form. The swift, litigious response from WE, however, was rage-inducing. They brought in a team of lawyers to send absurd documents, wrote threatening memos to their staff, published quotes from completely irrelevant people about how great WE is (including a bunch of giant corporation CEOs and their own Board of Directors). What they could have done is to discuss their purported screening process for deciding which companies they'll work with and which they won't (which, by the way, I asked for over 5.5 years and never saw), write a statement about the difficult choices facing the non-profit world, and creating a module for teens to struggle with the same issue and be part of the systemic change. They're one of the few organizations who have the reach and ability to do so and they totally squandered the opportunity, instead doubling down on defensive positions and further alienating themselves from the people they purport to want to help.

To be clear, a lot of good has been done and continues to be done at WE. A lot of people learn about social issues that wouldn't have before, leadership skills are built as young people learn about themselves through new frameworks and run change-making activities for the first time, staff create amazing programs, beautiful friendships are formed, incredible experiences are had, and yes there's a ton of fun. That doesn't mean that their problems don't need to be exposed,

and I'm working to have those positive aspects not be diminished by the problematic ones in my heart.

To the participants in our programs: I feel so deeply the confusion and hurt that you might be feeling right now. If you feel that your experience is tarnished in any way, I'm so sorry. Please know that anything you learned, connections formed, and change that you made is no less valuable, and is absolutely your own. I remain awed by you and am proud of you.

Below are some of the issues which I personally witnessed or was involved in. I've attempted to categorize them and make points, to try to avoid even more wall of text.

I want to lay out a few caveats:

First, I recognize that some of these are more 'serious' and urgent than others. We need to be taking immediate action on the racist and bigoted practices that are pervasive in the organization, as well as helping our colleagues in trouble.

Some of these are issues that many organizations have - which doesn't mean that they shouldn't be called out, but does mean that I believe they're more understandable and more a function of the system in which we live and operate.

I also recognize that some of these things either did begin improving while I worked there, or may have since I left three years ago, and I applaud the efforts of those who continue to push for change.

Second, I know that there are people I respect and care about who may feel taken aback by my writing about some of these issues, as they were involved. I want to reiterate what I wrote at the beginning - calling out can be an act of love. It's been a while since most of this occurred, and I know that the decisions and actions of many would be different now. I also strongly believe that the culture of the organization are what led to many of these actions by people who honestly didn't know any better - for most it was the first job they'd ever had, it's a very strong 'work culture' which enforced harmful decisions, there was very little management training, the edicts from Executive leadership were unequivocal, and there was a lot of contradictory information thrown at us constantly.

Employee exploitation and intimidation

-Staff were constantly overworked, giving far more than 40 hours per week, and expected to 'volunteer' for additional time. There was literally no such thing as overtime pay, and lieu time was up to the individual Managers; while lieu time (one day per full weekend worked, I think) became policy while I was there, it still did not begin to cover the extra hours. When facilitating a program, in which we often were the sole people in charge of the well-being of up to 30 kids each (and sometimes groups of hundreds), zero time off was built in. When a task needed doing, like stuffing WE Day tickets into envelopes or making gift bags, every staff from every department was told to sign up for extra shifts, and it was tracked when we didn't.

-There is an intense culture of martyrdom. Conversations around how busy we were happened regularly, with a sense of pride if you were up all night working on something or didn't have time to see any of your friends or family. It was expected, and a twisted badge of honour. This was absolutely clearly from the top, and trickled down to all employees in a not-so-subtle way. There would be occasional meetings on self-care and work-life balance that were a joke.

-The embarrassing compensation structure has been a not-funny joke amongst the sector for years, and is so indicative of a lack of respect for labour. Again, living on 'WE wages' was seen as a twisted badge of honour. When I started there in 2012 I negotiated my way to \$29,000 based on having advanced degrees and previous work experience. That's right, \$27,500 was standard. When I left in 2017, purportedly at a Manager level despite that not being my title (see that issue further down) I was making \$38,000. Any time additional work was required and I'd ask for compensation, I was told that wasn't possible. Instead of holiday bonuses or additional vacation days, we were given bracelets that the organization made in Kenya. If a team hit a sales goal, they occasionally went on a WE trip to one of our partner communities.

-With zero warning and no agenda given, I was called into a meeting with my Director, another colleague, and the CEO of Me to We. I was obviously confused and scared, and therefore unprepared. They were banking on this. I was told that my colleague and I would be moving over to the department that sold trips and camp for the next 2-3 months to help them reach their target numbers. My work hours would change effective immediately, my projects put on hold, my career goals stalled. When I asked if this was optional, I was told it was not. When I asked for compensation, I was given a gift card to the WE store. My Director (who had no day in this decision and I believe had protested jr) quietly arranged for me to have some extra vacation days that he just wouldn't record, and I requested to be sent to the UK office to run trainings when they next needed someone so that I could see Ely (he lived there at the time) but he had to do it on his own.

-I was asked to also observe the sales team (we were informed that it was not sales, it was 'experiences' so we weren't allowed to call it that) and to make a report on ways they could improve, as well as provide some training based on my time on the front lines with kids. I felt that at least this was something productive I could do to learn a new skill in evaluation, and to maybe make some changes in a team which I knew had a lot of toxic issues. I witnessed absurd tactics to intimidate the employees into pushing families to sign up for experiences that they absolutely could not afford; the shifting expectations often came straight from the CEO or the Keilburgers. Staff's sales numbers were called out in front of everyone twice a day, software and scripts were changed all the time, they had to speak about things that they had not experienced themselves and were often inaccurate, and breaks were timed to the second. I went to grab a tea with a colleague and came back to find a Manager standing there with a watch telling us that it had been 22 minutes rather than 20, so the next break would be 2 minutes shorter. I was told that this was par for the course. When I wrote up a report along with some recommendations to make the work culture less toxic, and tried to discuss it with leadership, I was then told it was not my place and that I didn't know what went on behind the scenes so I couldn't judge. I was told that the Managers were going to be receiving some training so the trainers would see on their own what the problems were.

-There was very little respect for how this financial instability affected staff. I had to use my own credit card to run camp, racking up literally thousands of dollars that I didn't have and paying interest, to receive reimbursements sometimes weeks and months later (if I'd done something wrong on a form it took a long time to come back) and no reimbursements for the interest. Staff on speaking tours for weeks had to use their own money.

-Our per diem was insultingly low - when I started I think it was \$10 for breakfast, \$12 for lunch and \$15 for dinner, and while it went up it was well below the government's recommendations. When I said once in a meeting with the CEO of Free the Children that the funds wouldn't cover a meal anywhere with tax and tip except for maybe Tim Horton's. He said that we should feel good about making change (a common refrain), go to Tim Horton's every day if we needed to, and that there was no need to tax above 5%.

-For some, especially young people coming to Toronto for their first job, their employment included housing (the organization owned many valuable properties in Cabbagetown in Toronto). While the spirit may have been community-building, this meant that their shelter and lives were literally tied up in the organization - complaining could cost them their homes.

-We had to learn key messaging verbatim, and were literally drilled and tested on it. At my first staff retreat, the Leadership team (my department) were asked to sit in the front row. Marc Keilburger paced back and forth erratically as he talked about how we were changing the world. He grabbed my thigh and those of my colleagues near me for emphasis - we then learned that he's known for doing it, and it became another one of those not-funny jokes. He would call on random staff members, make them stand up, and throw a phrase at them which they needed to define, word for word. If they didn't do it exactly right, he got visibly upset. After each biannual retreat, we'd hear from our Directors that Marc didn't think we knew the key messaging enough so we had to learn it again, and sometimes we'd even then have re-tests with Marc or other Executives.

-Hot tempers often ended up making the decisions. Too many times to count, I would come home defeated and upset because I'd brought up an idea in a meeting, my male colleagues and supervisors would end up getting upset about something, and I would be shot down. This happened over and over, in meetings with people from all departments. So many new female colleagues would come to me and share their stories of this happening and ask for my opinion on how to approach it. I could sometimes help them come up with a presentation or written report on what they wanted to present, with clear research behind it and solutions presented. This, by the way, was what I was told many times was the best way to present an idea I had. More often than not, it would be disregarded in favour of something that someone else was shouting about, and honestly we would just be too tired to fight it.

-In a meeting with the CEO of then-Free the Children, we were learning about a new campaign and how our messaging was that \$25 would buy a lifetime of water for one person. I asked questions, including what type of water source was being made, what did a 'lifetime' mean

(turns out it meant the lifetime of the well, which was about 20 years), and more, so that I could understand it when teaching kids and preparing programming. I was told that I didn't need to know all of the details and that I was being hostile. The CEO then told my Director to tell me that I was unprofessional.

Discrimination and intimidation of new mothers*

*While these are my experiences, I know that they happened to other people who went on leave after me. We even formed a small group together to share these stories and ideas to make things better. HR heard about us and asked to send a representative to our chats (which of course made it not the supportive group we needed) and asked us to come up with policies for them. While giving recommendations informally is fine, there are professionals who can be consulted to come up with the best policies to help the entire organization. Most new mothers left within a few months of coming back from leave, if they returned at all.

-When I came back from nine month maternity leave, I was told casually in a meeting that the person who had covered my leave was now going to be promoted, and that another colleague was going to be my direct supervisor, effectively demoting me to a level below where I had been (there were now two people between me and the Director when there had previously been one). When I expressed in the meeting that I was upset about this arrangement, that I should have been consulted while on leave (I'd been in touch and asked to be kept abreast of issues) and that demoting me was insulting, I was told that I had insulted my colleague who had been promoted and should apologize for it, effectively ignoring the issues. I consulted with someone from HR, and was told that they had asked legal and because my title and pay didn't change, it wasn't a demotion on paper so it wasn't technically illegal. I asked why I was not given the opportunity to be in the running for the position directly above mine, and was told that they didn't think it made sense for me to apply while I was on leave or that I wouldn't want to and would rather want to 'catch up.' I was also told that my colleague had been promoted to a Manager and was told she would get experience supervising others, so that had to be me. I said that my career shouldn't suffer because they'd made an empty promise, and was again told to be grateful since I was coming back after 'time off' (it was referred to as time off or a vacation many times, even after I asked that to stop, and even when introducing me to new staff my time on leave was subtracted from the number of years they said I had been there).

-I had sought to have my position (Research and Program Development) be one that was a manager role, which was the only upward move. I was told that the organization was introducing a new level, Specialist, which was at the same hierarchical level as Manager and that managers would only be roles which supervised other people, and so I became a Specialist. When dealing with the above issue, I expressed that it made no sense to have a Manager supervising someone who was at the same level as them. I was then told that Specialist was never meant to be the same level as Manager and that I had never been told that, effectively gaslighting me while still demoting me. The solution was to have both the Manager and the AD supervising me,

which led to confusion and micromanagement and miscommunications. This was what finally led to me rage quitting a few months later, even before finding another job.

-I needed a space to pump breast milk, which I'd told them when planning to come back. I was given a bathroom with no chair, and it was the only bathroom in that office which meant I'd be taking it away from people who needed to use it. Then when I'd told them they needed to provide a space with a plug that wasn't a bathroom, I was told I could use an office that was occupied by 4 people in another department, so I would need to ask them to leave it when I needed to pump. I was understandably uncomfortable with this, and within a month I was unable to pump and then breastfeed any more.

-When they were building the new building, I saw that it was almost entirely open plan for about 500 people. I asked about a space for people to nurse or pump, and they said that no one had brought it up and that people could use the bathrooms. I pointed out that there were a few rooms in the basement designed as wellness spaces, and that one of them could be sectioned off to have a designated room with a couple of chairs. I even researched the by-laws on new builds and providing space for nursing, and sent it to them. This did not happen.

-When I was preparing to go on maternity leave, I asked about their policies for leave and returning. **They didn't have any.** An organization of 800+ staff, most of whom were young cis women, didn't have any policies. I was told that I was the first non-Executive to go on leave and to then return to the organization, so they didn't need to have anything. I pointed out that perhaps that was part of the reason that people didn't return from parental leaves. They told me that they would work on policies while I was on leave, would be in touch with organizational news (which I'd requested), and would have things in place when I returned nine months later. They did not. My supervisors received no information from HR, I returned to a new structure, I was effectively demoted (see above) and the organization even had a new name that I didn't know about. This lack of policies was a huge part of the reason for many of the above issues - my leadership simply had no experience with this, and no guidance or training from the organization.

Prioritizing donors and fundraising over participants and social justice

-A metric for evaluation of the speaking and facilitation tours was how many students could be signed up for paid experiences - international trips or camps. We received more training on this than on anything else - how to speak about the experiences, how to sell them (though we were very specifically told that this wasn't sales), how to encourage students to fundraise the thousands of dollars needed. This included the tours and programs where we worked with marginalized and low-income communities already, including Indigenous ones. Again, we were encouraged to get the kids to spend a long time - often years - fundraising thousands of dollars to pay the organization to go on these experiences, rather than mobilize funds for their own communities. We were partly evaluated based on how many we signed up; we were publicly

celebrated when we reached targets and held up as examples to the rest of the team, and had to do extra trainings when we didn't. These metrics came from Executive leadership.

-While on an international trip with a group of young adult (age 21+) participants, a principal of the local school we were working with put his arm tightly around the waist and kissed a female participant on the lips while taking a picture with her while we were at a party. She laughed it off in the moment (a feeling we all know too well) but was uncomfortable and cried to me about it after. I spoke to the principal about how inappropriate it was and asked him to delete the photo in front of me, while his colleagues surrounded me and told me he was just joking, and my co-facilitator pulled me away. My co and the country director (on the phone with us) then literally said that she was asking for it the way she dresses and behaves; when I got so upset at them that I started crying and saying that this is what women deal with all the time, my co (who later became a Director) said that he didn't know I'd been harassed myself so I was taking it personally. We were told that they were important partners so we didn't want to make them any more upset. I tried to escalate it and was shut down every time.

-A teacher said a racist comment to a non-white facilitator, and it was laughed off by others standing there. We spoke about it and then she told our supervisors about it; she was told that she probably misunderstood and he didn't mean it, and that they were important clients.

-A participant at a program for teens with social difficulties told a joke about hurting women in front of other kids. I got mad at him - granted possibly snapped a little quickly - and he lunged at me while swearing. I dodged him. The response was to have a reconciliation circle (which I do think can be a great tool), and when I expressed that I'd felt unsafe, I was told by my leadership that they were an important client and so I shouldn't say anything like that again. It came up as a negative in my evaluation.

-When writing speeches or programming, we received some clear directions that compromised our values but appeased the donors. For example, in the Potash-funded speech, we weren't allowed us to use the term 'climate change.' A huge one was that we weren't allowed to speak about LGBTQ* or reproductive justice with Catholic and other religious groups. I literally went to do action planning with a Catholic school and their goal was to get their whole (PUBLICALLY FUNDED) school to attend the anti-choice rally that they were organizing. I told them I disagreed, and received a criticism from the teachers in an evaluation.

-I wrote and facilitated Indigenous programming ON MY OWN or with other non-Indigenous facilitators, both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. I expressed my discomfort many times, and it was rationalized that this was important programming (sponsored and partly written by a major national insurance/investment company, by the way) and that if we didn't facilitate it, they wouldn't receive it. When I asked them to hire more than one Indigenous facilitator, I was always told that they were 'working on it.' Much of the Indigenous programming was worked on and facilitated by that one Indigenous staff member, who had not been initially hired to do that specific programming but ended up needing to shoulder most of it - creating programming,

facilitating it, and being a face at public events when needed. She pushed hard to carve more of a space for herself and most of this programming, and absolutely should not have had to do it on her own.

Lack of support for staff, leading to dangerous participant situations

-Due to the nature of our programming, we had tons of disclosures - kids telling us about suicide attempts and thoughts, self-harming activities, abuse, and more. This often happened on trips and camp where we were the primary respondents. We had very little training on how to respond and no support for the other participants who heard them too. Our main response was to call our risk team who often told us to call CAS, which we know doesn't always have anyone's best interests at heart, especially if they're not white. The training that we did receive was not from field professionals like psychologists or counselors; I actually ended up writing a lot of our training, for which I am not professionally equipped.

-We also had no support for us after having dealt with these issues. At the end of a week of camp, I would have 22 year old staff coming to me saying that they felt really drained from having helped seven kids through life-altering issues, and I would have little to offer them. I requested some help for the staff multiple times, and other than an extra day off and recommendation to contact our EAP (which not all staff had) we didn't receive anything. We once were offered one group session with a counselor, and it was never scheduled.

-While facilitating twelve international trips over my time there was amazing, there were some big issues with the lack of support that staff received which in turn led to some potentially dangerous situations.

-We worked 24 hours a day with no time off, and no connection to the outside world (Ely vividly remembers my two months in Kenya where I had to whisper call him for 5 minutes each night where the kids couldn't hear me, standing in the one spot I could find reception).

-I once worked six straight weeks with literally zero time off, doing three overlapping trips in Ecuador. On my third one I needed to mentor new facilitators during it, and was of course not at my best. I had warned the leadership about this when being scheduled, and yet it still came up as a negative against me in my post-trip evaluation.

-I was sent to India for my first time to do a trip on my own - no co-facilitator. I didn't know the area or the community we were working in, relying strictly on my duotang handbook. When I had a conflict with one of the teachers on the trip, a local staff member came to help as a co-facilitator. I again received a lot of negative feedback on my evaluations, despite trying desperately before and during the trips to change the situation.

-On my first night of trip in China, my (lovely) male co-facilitator (who I'd just met that day) and I were given one hotel room, and told there was nothing they could do about it because they couldn't book us another room. I escalated the issue, was told to deal with it, and we slept in the bed together with a pillow between us.

-We used extremely old equipment for as long as possible, despite warnings against it. It was a known 'joke' in Kenya that the decommissioned WWII lorries we drove around in would break

down all the time. Indeed, on every incredible safari day I went on, we broke down in the scorching heat at least twice. Rangers with guns would have to drive over and find us before we could let the participants off the lorry, because we were literally right beside a herd of giraffe or hippo. Definitely experiences that would usually be incredible adventures, but not when you have 25 lives in your hands. One time ours broke down during a flash flood and we started literally floating away; I sat at the back nearly breaking my co-facilitators' hand as we reassured the participants that this was all totally fine. There was definitely no page for that in my duotang.