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Jan 2026

Equity & AI Session 1 Overview

Moving with Intention: Exploring AI Equity Findings and Building Your Next Steps

Our first Equity & AI session brought together nonprofit leaders, practitioners, funders, and partners from across Canada and beyond to explore what AI equity really looks like in practice – not just in principle. Facilitated by Meena Das (she/her), CEO of Namaste Data and lead researcher of the AI Equity Project, the session grounded big questions about AI in real sector data, lived nonprofit experience, and collective reflection. This session marked a shift away from "AI hype" and toward intentional, equity-centred decision-making.

How People Arrived in the Room

Before diving into tools, policies, or next steps, the session made space to name how people were actually feeling about AI. Participants described arriving with a mix of emotions about AI: Overwhelmed, Curious, Cautious, Scared, Intrigued, Excited.

These reflections were framed as an honest starting point. They surfaced the reality that many nonprofit practitioners are navigating AI in real time – balancing excitement, concern, responsibility, and uncertainty. Naming these feelings helped ground the session in lived experience and set the tone for the series: this is a space for collective learning, reflection, and shared responsibility – not having all the answers.

Why This Session Matters

AI is already shaping how nonprofits work – from communications and data analysis to fundraising, service delivery, and decision-making. Yet many organizations are adopting AI tools faster than they are building the policies, skills, and governance needed to use them responsibly. This session was grounded in findings from the AI Equity Project, a multi-year research and listening initiative led by Namaste Data that examines how nonprofit organizations in Canada and the United States are experiencing, resourcing, and governing AI. The project draws on survey data, applied work, and sector engagement to surface where AI is creating value – and where it risks reinforcing harm or inequity. During the session, Meena shared insights from the 2025 phase of the study, which included insights from 850 nonprofit organizations. Several findings helped anchor the conversation:

- 76% of nonprofits are using AI in some capacity, up from 59% in 2024, often for writing, analysis, communications, and program support.
- Only 15% have any AI policy or governance in place, leaving many organizations without clear guardrails
- Equity concerns are widely recognized, particularly around bias and harm, but many organizations lack clarity on who is responsible for addressing these risks
- Budgeting for AI learning and training remains rare, with AI work frequently falling to one staff member without time, support, or safeguards

The central question that framed the discussion: Will AI widen inequities in our sector – or help reduce them? The answer, as participants agreed, depends on how we choose to use it. This session created space to explore that question honestly, collectively, and with concrete examples from across the sector.

AI Equity Project Highlights: What We Explored Together

Meena grounded the session in three core findings from the AI Equity Project, drawing directly from conversations and data across nonprofit organizations in Canada and the United States. These highlights resonated strongly with participants because they reflected lived sector realities – not abstract theory.

1. AI Readiness Is Stuck in Curiosity Mode

Across the sector, interest in AI is high – but readiness remains low. Many organizations are adopting AI tools quickly, often without the governance, training, or shared understanding needed to use them responsibly. AI is being adopted faster than organizations are prepared to govern it – or to understand its equity implications. As Meena shared, this often shows up as: "Our intern is the AI expert because she used ChatGPT in college."

When AI responsibility is informal and under-resourced, the way tools are chosen, trained, and used can unintentionally reinforce existing inequities – including gender bias, racial bias, exclusion of marginalized voices, and decision-making that lacks consent or community accountability. Without intentional learning and oversight, AI use risks quietly undermining the equity commitments organizations are actively trying to advance.

II. Equity Concerns Are Loud – But Action Is Quiet

Across the AI Equity Project findings and the session discussion, one pattern was clear: nonprofits are deeply concerned about AI bias and harm – but few feel equipped to act. Participants recognized risks related to:

- Bias embedded in data and algorithms
- Reinforcing systemic inequities, including racism and gender inequality
- Loss of consent, transparency, and community voice
- Decisions being automated without accountability

Yet these concerns often stall at awareness. As Meena summarized: "Everyone worries about bias. No one knows who's in charge of fixing it." Without clear ownership, shared understanding, or equity-infused governance structures, equity risks remain abstract – acknowledged but not consistently operationalized. Many organizations name equity as a core value, but lack the tools, clarity, and processes to ensure AI use actively supports gender justice, anti-racism, and inclusion in everyday practice.

The session also surfaced uncertainty about how to craft meaningful organizational AI policies. Meena emphasized that AI policies are not a silver bullet, but can play an important role when they are:

- Simple rather than perfect
- Actively shared and used by staff
- Grounded in organizational values
- Treated as living documents that evolve through practice and reflection

The ongoing challenge – and opportunity – is how to make AI policies practical tools for equity-informed decision-making, rather than static documents that sit unused. This question emerged as a key area for deeper exploration in future sessions. Stay tuned!

III. Nonprofits Want AI for Good – But Feel Ill-Equipped to Resource It

The AI Equity Project findings and session discussion underscored a persistent gap between intent and capacity. While many nonprofits want to engage with AI responsibly and in alignment with their equity commitments, most are doing so without the resources needed to learn, adapt, and govern AI well.

A core issue highlighted in the research is the near absence of dedicated budgets for AI learning and capacity-building. Tools are often purchased without parallel investment in staff training, collective learning, or reflection on equity implications. As Meena shared: "We bought the tool. No budget for training. So, it's all down to Jane. She's a data person."

This resourcing gap has direct equity implications. When AI learning is informal, uneven, or dependent on individual staff capacity, decisions about how tools are used – and whose voices, data, and experiences are centred – can unintentionally reinforce existing power imbalances. Participants reflected on how this dynamic leaves organizations struggling to:

- Share responsibility for AI use across teams
- Build common understanding of risks and safeguards
- Ensure AI practices align with commitments to gender equality, anti-racism, and inclusion

The issue is not a lack of care or intention, but a lack of time, funding, and shared infrastructure to support equity-centred AI practice.

4. Approaches and Equity Considerations Surfaced in the Session

The session surfaced several approaches and equity considerations related to how AI might be used – or questioned – in nonprofit contexts. These were raised through Meena's framing and examples, alongside questions that emerged during discussion. Key approaches and considerations included:

- **Intentionally resourcing staff learning and sharing responsibility for AI use:** The session emphasized the importance of intentionally resourcing staff time to explore AI tools, even in small ways, rather than leaving learning informal or unpaid.

The idea of supporting staff to experiment within clear parameters and then share lessons internally was raised as a way to distribute responsibility and avoid AI knowledge sitting with one individual.

- **A concern raised about funders' use of AI in grant review:** A question raised during the session focused on funders using AI to review long and complex grant applications. The concern was whether this use of AI reduces workload for funders without reducing the time, administrative effort, and unpaid labour required of applicants – particularly smaller or equity-seeking organizations. Equity consideration: Equity-centred AI requires asking whether technology is being used to make systems fairer and more accessible, or simply faster without addressing underlying barriers.

Three Practical Starting Points Shared in the Session

Rather than offering a checklist or technical roadmap, Meena emphasized three practical starting points that nonprofits can take right now – regardless of size, budget, or level of AI use.

1. **Advocate for learning**. Create intentional space – and modest budget, where possible – for staff to explore AI tools, reflect on risks, and share lessons with one another. Learning was framed as a collective responsibility, not something left to one "AI person" or done off the side of someone's desk.
2. **Become friends with your data.** Before focusing on AI tools, Meena emphasized the importance of understanding the data being used. This includes asking practical questions such as: Who is represented in this data – and who is missing? How was the data collected, and with what consent? What context might be lost if data are summarized or analyzed by AI?
   The takeaway was that equity risks often start with data, not technology. Taking time to understand the limits, gaps, and assumptions in your data helps organizations use AI more responsibly and avoid reinforcing existing inequities.
3. **Push for policy – even imperfect ones.** AI policies were discussed not as a compliance exercise, but as a way to create shared understanding and accountability. Meena emphasized that policies do not need to be long or perfect. What matters is that they are:

·Accessible to staff
·Actively used, not filed away
·Iterative, evolving with practice and learning
·Aligned with organizational values, including equity commitments

What's Next?

This session was the first in a six-part Equity and AI learning series, with one session held each month. Together, the series is designed to move from awareness to practice — creating space to explore real questions, share experiences, and build more equitable approaches to AI over time. Our next session will take place in February, followed by four additional sessions to complete the series. Each session will continue to build on what surfaced here, going deeper into practical questions around governance, policy, data, power, and equity-centred AI use in the nonprofit and international cooperation sector.

This is a participatory series. If you have ideas for future session topics, potential speakers, relevant case examples, or questions you'd like us to explore, I would love to hear from you. Please reach out to Paula Richardson at richardson@salanga.org.

We look forward to continuing the conversation — together.

About the Equity and AI Learning Series

The Equity & AI Learning Series is a six-session collaborative learning initiative led by Cooperation Canada, in partnership with Salanga, created in response to the rapid adoption of AI across the nonprofit and international cooperation sector. As AI tools increasingly shape how organizations design programs, manage data, make decisions, and allocate resources, this series creates space to slow down, reflect, and ask harder questions about power, equity, harm, and responsibility. Grounded in feminist, intersectional, and community-centred approaches, the series brings together practitioners, researchers, and sector leaders to explore how AI can be used with intention – centring people, relationships, and justice rather than efficiency alone.

The Equity and AI learning series is coordinated by Paula Richardson, Director of Collaborative Evaluation, Learning, and Impact at Salanga. Feel free to connect with her on LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/in/paula-nicole-richardson/

Key Resources:

- AI Equity Project – Namaste Data
- A multi-year research and listening project examining how nonprofits are using AI, where equity risks are emerging, and what responsible, equity-centred AI practice can look like in real organizational contexts. https://www.namastedata.org/aiequityproject
- Namaste Data
- Research, tools, and resources focused on data equity, community-centred data practices, and responsible AI use in the nonprofit and social impact sector. https://www.namastedata.org
- Meena Das (she/her)
- CEO of Namaste Data and lead researcher behind the AI Equity Project. Meena regularly shares insights on data equity, AI, and nonprofit practice. LinkedIn: http://www.linkedin.com/in/meenadas
- Session materials
- The MIRO collaboration board and the session recording are being shared directly with registered participants.