

Bridging Belonging

What Happens When Community Systems Are Not Designed for Intersectional Identities?

SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE · 2026

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WHY THIS MATTERS

Why This Matters

Belonging is often treated as a social or cultural outcome. In practice, it is also a systems outcome.

When people are able to navigate services, access support, and participate in community life in ways that reflect their full identity, systems function more effectively. When they cannot, the impacts extend beyond individual experience into health, economic participation, and long-term social stability.

This paper focuses on gender-diverse Africans — people of African descent who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+ or gender-diverse — as a population navigating multiple intersecting systems simultaneously. For this community, belonging is shaped not by a single system, but by settlement services, health systems, employment supports, cultural communities, and 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces operating in parallel.

Each plays an important role. Yet each is often designed around a single axis of identity or need. The result is not exclusion in a single system, but fragmentation across many.

The Systems Gap

Most public and community systems are designed around defined categories of need. Settlement systems support newcomers. Health systems address physical and mental health. Employment systems support labour market integration. Community organizations foster belonging and connection. Identity-based organizations provide cultural or gender-affirming support.

Each system is necessary. Each system is incomplete on its own.

The challenge emerges when individuals live at the intersection of multiple identities and experiences simultaneously. For gender-diverse Africans, this may include navigating migration, cultural identity, racial identity, gender identity, faith, family expectations, and community belonging — all at the same time. No single system is typically designed to hold all of these dimensions together.

THE INVISIBLE GAP BETWEEN SYSTEMS

The Invisible Gap Between Systems

Individuals do not experience life in silos. They experience it as a continuum of identity, relationships, responsibilities, and lived reality. Yet systems are often structured as separate service lanes.

This creates what can be described as an “invisible gap between systems”: a space where individuals may be technically eligible for multiple supports, but not fully held by any single one.

In this space, people often move between services without experiencing continuity, cultural alignment, or holistic support. This is not the result of any single organization failing. It is the result of systems being designed independently of one another, rather than in relation to how people actually live.

Why This Matters for Manitoba

As Manitoba continues to evolve as a diverse and growing province, the question of belonging is not only cultural — it is structural.

When people experience fragmented access to support, the downstream effects may include reduced community participation, increased isolation and mental health strain, barriers to service navigation and trust-building, and missed opportunities for early intervention and support. Over time, these gaps can influence broader outcomes related to wellbeing, integration, and long-term community stability.

The question is not whether services exist. It is whether those services are designed in a way that reflects the complexity of lived experience.

This requires moving beyond single-identity service design toward more integrated thinking about how systems interact, overlap, and unintentionally create gaps.

LOOKING AHEAD

Looking Ahead

Emerging diversity in Manitoba is reshaping how communities form, how people access support, and how institutions respond to complexity. This creates both a challenge and an opportunity.

A challenge, because existing systems were not always designed for intersectional lived experience. An opportunity, because systems can evolve when gaps become visible and better understood.

Bridging Belonging is part of NIA's broader effort to surface systems-level insights that shape how communities, institutions, and policymakers understand inclusion. The goal is not to replace existing systems. It is to better understand where fragmentation occurs, and how more connected approaches to belonging and support might strengthen outcomes for individuals and communities alike.

Belonging is not a single service outcome. It is the result of how systems work together — or do not.

ABOUT THE NIA INITIATIVE

The Nia Initiative is a systems design organization working at the intersection of institutional transformation, African women's leadership, and care-centered practice. We design the structures behind access, dignity, and long-term opportunity — with communities at the centre of that work.

The Nia Initiative

nia.purposedriven@gmail.com

Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Care that reduces harm. Systems that restore dignity. Communities that lead.