

**FENOMENAL
FUNDS**

REIMAGINING POWER TO BUILD RESILIENCE



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Fenomenal Funds is a feminist funder collaborative using pooled funding, shared governance model and participatory grantmaking to support the resilience of women's/feminist funds who are members of the [Prospera International Network of Women's Funds](#). Cite as: Fenomenal Funds (2023) *Reimagining Power to Build Resilience*, Fenomenal Funds: Washington, DC.

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- members of our Steering Committee and Advisory Committee, for their enthusiasm in embracing this bold experiment:

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Designed by [Chelsea Very](#).

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Women Fund Tanzania Trust - Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
Xoese - Le Fond pour les Femmes Congolaises - Lomé, Togo

ASIA & THE PACIFIC

Korea Foundation for Women - Seoul, South Korea
Mones-Mongolia Women's Fund - Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
Tewa - Lalitpur, Nepal
Urgent Action Fund Asia and Pacific - Manila, Philippines
Women's Fund Asia - Colombo, Sri Lanka
Women's Fund Fiji - Suva, Fiji

EUROPE

Bulgarian Fund for Women - Sofia, Bulgaria
Calala Fondo de Mujeres - Barcelona, Spain
Ecumenical Women's Initiative - Omis, Croatia
FemFund Poland - Warsaw, Poland
Mediterranean Women's Fund - Montpellier, France
Reconstruction Women's Fund - Belgrade, Serbia
Slovak-Czech Women's Fund - Prague, Czech Republic
Taso Foundation - Tbilisi, Georgia
Ukrainian Women's Fund - Kiev, Ukraine
Women's Fund Armenia - Yerevan, Armenia
Women's Fund in Georgia - Tbilisi, Georgia

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ELAS+ - Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
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Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (FCAM) - San Jose, Costa Rica
Fondo de Mujeres Apthapi-Jopueti - La Paz, Bolivia
Fondo de Mujeres del Sur - Cordoba, Argentina
Fondo Lunaria Mujer - Bogota, Colombia
Fondo Semillas - Mexico City, Mexico
Urgent Action Fund - Latin America & The Caribbean - Bogota, Colombia

MULTI-REGIONAL

Astraea - Lesbian Foundation for Justice - New York, USA
Filia Die Frauenstiftung - Hamburg, Germany
Equality Fund - Ottawa, Canada
Frida | Young Feminist Fund - Toronto, Canada
Global Fund for Women - San Francisco, USA
International Indigenous Women's Forum - Lima, Peru
Mama Cash - Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights - Oakland, USA
Women First International Fund - New York, USA
Women Win - Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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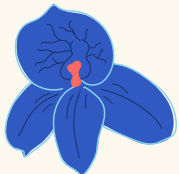
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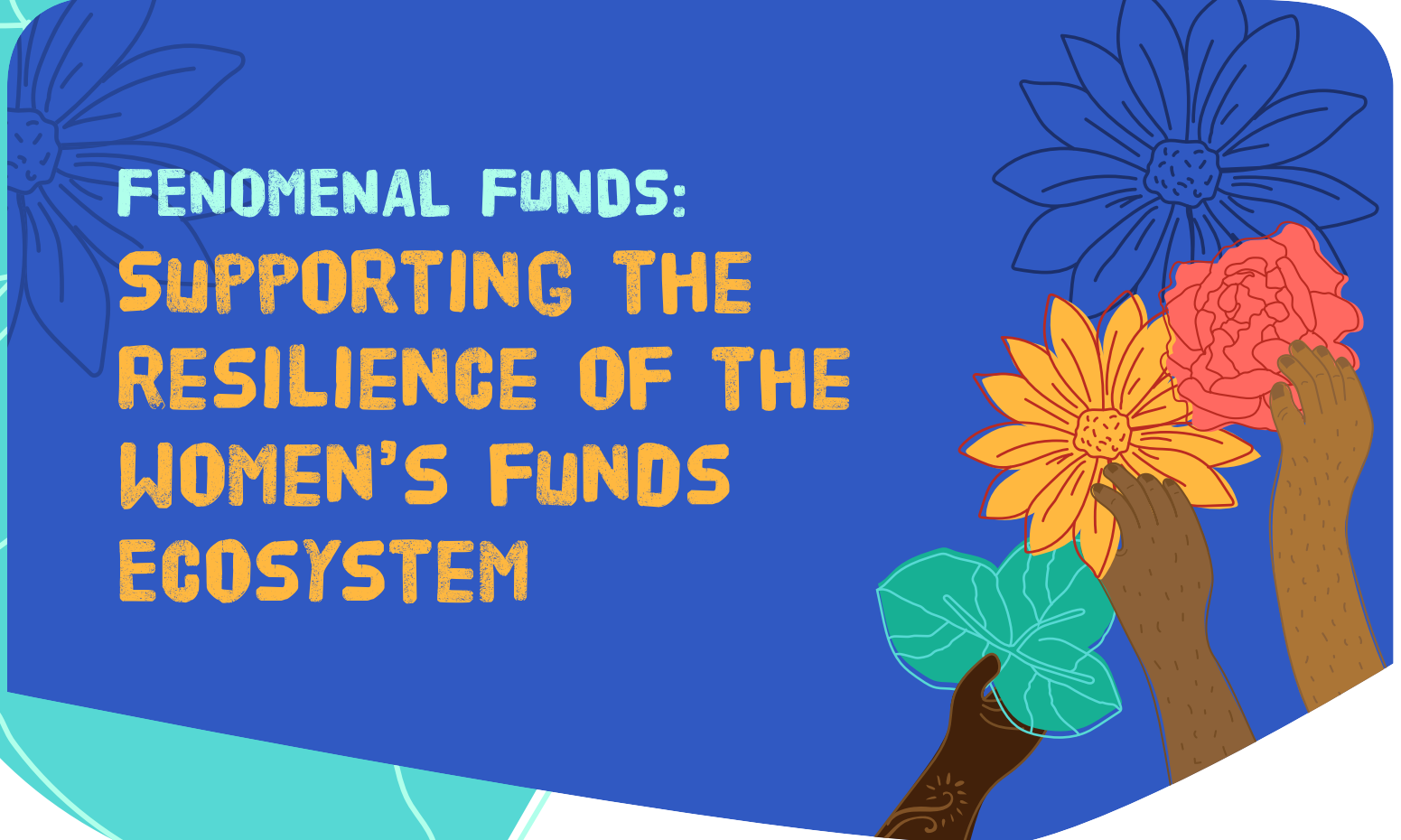
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An illustration on a dark blue background shows several hands of different skin tones holding various flowers. One hand holds a large yellow flower, another holds a pink flower, and a third holds a green leaf. In the background, there are faint outlines of other flowers. The text is overlaid on the left side of this illustration.

FENOMENAL FUNDS: SUPPORTING THE RESILIENCE OF THE WOMEN'S FUNDS ECOSYSTEM

In March 2020, women's funds, private philanthropies, and the Prospera International Network of Women's Funds (Prospera INWF) Secretariat came together to launch Fenomenal Funds, a bold and audacious initiative to reimagine power and strengthen the global feminist funding infrastructure.

Their collaborative effort and co-creation led to a new funding model that integrates a pooled fund, a shared governance model and participatory grantmaking to invest in the infrastructure of women's funds, with a focus on members of the Prospera INWF. It took the collective effort and wisdom of many to bring the vision to its full expression. Each individual and institution contributed to building the collaborative structures necessary to put feminist funding principles into practice.

But what does this mean practically?

WE DISRUPT POWER...

We believe that the process of challenging the coloniality¹ of power in philanthropy is necessary to move us collectively towards more equal and just futures. We understand decoloniality as the deliberate process of deconstructing and transforming dominant power structures and ways of engaging that exert power and control over resources, knowledge, culture, narrative, and identity.²

1 A concept related to colonialism, but goes beyond the mere acquisition and political control of another country. It is an ideological system that explains the long-standing patterns of power that resulted from European colonialism. It is the visible and invisible power structure that sustains colonial relations of exploitation and domination long after the end of direct colonialism. MIGNOLO, W. D., & WALSH, C. E. (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke University Press.

2 Sylvia Tamale. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Daraja Press, Ottawa 2020.

...WE REIMAGINE THE EXERCISE OF POWER IN DECISION-MAKING...

We challenge the configurations of how decisions are made and invest in institutions and systems that support the exercise of equal power in decision-making. Democratizing philanthropy is about bringing women's funds and private philanthropy to sit at the table together to weigh perspectives, formulate actions, and decide a way forward, together. Equal voice. Equal power.

...AND WE ARE INTENTIONAL IN OUR SUPPORT OF WOMEN'S FUNDS AND ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO THEM.

We are intentional about how we support the community of women's funds, individually and collectively, and the way in which we are accountable to the collective. As we work together to imagine and operationalize what *could be*, we are also aware that what *currently exists* needs to be challenged and changed. The process of strengthening the feminist funding ecosystem must be iterative, systemic, and imaginative.

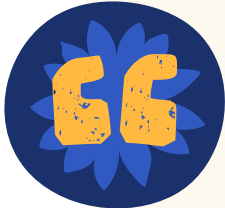
We understand it takes ambition and imagination to build new constructs that more authentically center philanthropic decision-making in the collective power and knowledge of women's funds and the movements they support. The opportunity is to embody new ways of being in relationship with each other that are rooted in equity, justice, and liberation.

What follows in this report are highlights of how this unique model – particularly through our Resilience Grants – supported Fenomenal Funds to respond to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that would not have been possible if this group of people had not come together under this novel way of working. We also share insights that emerge from analysis of women's funds' reports and proposals and what they tell us about their needs and priorities. We surface both what we have learned and what we hope to learn as we continue this journey.

We distilled some key recommendations from the learning process, and share them in summary form below, alongside reflections from two Advisory Committee members (a key structure in our power-sharing experiment): Rose Marandu, from the Women Fund Tanzania Trust; and Amy Bisno, from the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund. It is our hope that, by grounding these recommendations in Rose and Amy's reflections, you will appreciate the ethos of our experiment: bringing voices to the 'table' in a different way. These recommendations include some things that are familiar as well as others that point to new considerations for the wider philanthropic community.



1. Center the voice, knowledge, and experience of grant recipients in strategy and funding decisions, so that resources address the needs and priorities of the organizations receiving the funds.



It's feminist funding, because Fenomenal Funds challenges power. Feminism looks at nothing but power: who holds power, what are the centers of power, and how is that power used and distributed? With Fenomenal Funds, they are shifting power from power over - to power to and power with. They fund us and listen - we say now is not the time to initiate the collaboration grants so the approach shifted, and they gave another round of resilience grants...the grantmaking process continued to deal with the things already happening, and everybody had the freedom to pick the pieces that would really resonate with their needs. And the national women's funds - we are all equal, charting the way we want to distribute the resources, the length of grant, equitable distribution of these resources and for everyone to be able to be part of the process. This type of participation in grantmaking usually does not happen so it is important to pay attention to how empowering it can be. ”

- Rose Marandu | Women Fund Tanzania Trust

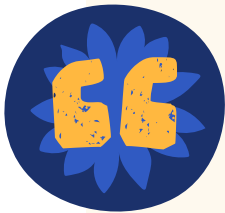


At Wellspring the portfolio I manage is almost exclusively general operating support grants, which in a sense is what these Resilience Grants were. I've always felt and seen the importance of unrestricted funding, and the way it can have an outsized impact on an organization and on a sector. ”

- Amy Bisno | Wellspring Philanthropic Fund



2. Provide flexible, multi-year funding that empowers women's funds to determine their own most pressing needs for their organizational infrastructure, particularly investments in people, systems, and assets.



I think one of the challenges we women's funds are always facing is limited resources. The type of funders we want to attract are limited because we want progressive funders. We want flexible funds with fewer strings and we want multi-year funding. With Fenomenal Funds we have that, which very few funders give. ””

- Rose Marandu | Women Fund Tanzania Trust

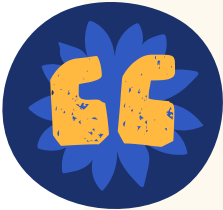


I think human rights actors feel all the time, if they're offered funding, that they want to immediately contribute the funds to social justice causes with their constituents. But if you add the limitation that it can't be for re-granting, and say, here is some flexible funding to really think about perfecting your fund, and building it into something that you've always imagined... I think that's a really incredible opportunity, and I don't think it has existed anywhere else in the social justice sector. ””

- Amy Bisno | Wellspring Philanthropic Fund



3. Use non-competitive funding approaches that foster a culture of solidarity within a defined ecosystem.



I sense that the setup of the Resilience Grants - this money is here, you are going to get it – it takes some pressure off. It breaks down barriers and allows for a more trusting exchange between funder and recipient. And also, because they're not competitive: you know you're going to get this money. You know your friends are going to get this money. And that opens the space for you to think about what you really need to invest in without a high stress, high stakes situation. It enables more trusting and honest and open conversations.

This is trust-based philanthropy. ””

- Amy Bisno | Wellspring Philanthropic Fund

4. Use a peer-led participatory review process coupled with simple and streamlined reporting and application processes.

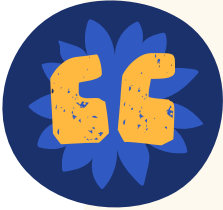


What is different about this type of funding, as well, is the shared governance aspect. It shifts power from the power holder (the funder) and brings the power to the women's funds themselves. Women's funds have their own objectives. The Advisory Committee is a peer body that can provide input and offer suggestions to women's funds like "did you consider this in your proposal?" But the ownership and the power remain with the women's funds and it is their choice to take these suggestions or not. This approach of peer review is constructive.

- Rose Marandu | Women Fund Tanzania Trust



5. Create spaces and opportunities to build relationships and nurture trust in order to reframe power relations.



I can say that the Advisory Committee is stronger because of this process and thanks to the support of the Fenomenal Funds staff. We had to be clear about our values and we had to have direct and clear conversations to be able to make decisions that reflected our values (even when that took more energy). That also facilitated better communication and understanding between private foundations and women's funds. ”

- Amy Bisno | Wellspring Philanthropic Fund

6. Pool resources from diverse funders to increase the amount of funding available and to meet the scope and scale of the challenges.



One of the critical decisions made in the planning phase was to make this a pooled fund. Rather than each foundation making separate grants, and therefore the women's funds working with four different funders, a pooled fund allowed for funding to be done collectively. This has a powerful effect for both the foundations and the women's funds. Besides more resources, it made some of the decisions - like equal funding to all women's funds - possible. Most funders would not be in a position to do that. ”

- Amy Bisno | Wellspring Philanthropic Fund



7. Invest in systems and processes that enable real-time learning and authorize those lessons to be integrated into strategy revisions and organizational process updates.



We need to know how our model of feminist grantmaking and shared governance is making a difference to women's funds; the Prospera INWF Network & funding partners. So we have put in place an approach which will help us to capture and synthesize what we learn and integrate it into our model for it to evolve based on feminist principles. We don't want to wait to find out what we have learned in two years or at the end. We want to know in real time so we can use the knowledge generated to advocate for the changes needed now.



- Rose Marandu | Women Fund Tanzania Trust

**WE INVITE YOU TO BE PART
OF OUR JOURNEY!**



OUR PREMISE, HYPOTHESIS, AND MODEL



Fenomenal Funds, a feminist funder collaborative, is a bold and innovative experiment that brings together private foundations and women’s funds – in partnership with Prospera INWF. Our aim: **to strengthen the ecosystem of women’s funds.**

The underlying premise of our work is that women’s funds – particularly national women’s funds in the global South – are chronically underfunded, yet they are also the main source of funding for grassroots gender justice movements.³ This underfunding takes two forms: an under-resourcing of women’s funds as entities that meaningfully and accountably support movements; and in turn, the under-resourcing of grassroots gender justice movements. This lack of sustained and meaningful investment in women’s funds is detrimental to advancing gender justice.

Women’s funds have a long track record of knowing where, and more importantly how, to support gender justice movements.⁴ They emerge from movements, remain connected to the context and to the communities they serve, which positions them to respond quickly to what is needed most, especially for those at the margins. **By resourcing women’s funds to deepen investments in their own organizational strengths and capacity, Fenomenal Funds enhances the resilience, voice, and visibility of women’s funds to fulfill their mission to resource and support grassroots movements.**

3 Funding for women’s rights organizing not only remains limited, it is also unequally distributed across regions and movements, and often does not reach grassroots groups. Analysis from the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) shows that while resources allocated to ‘women and girls’ have increased, just a trickle of that funding reaches women’s rights organizations (WROs). AWID’s most recent analysis shows that out of USD99 billion in grants awarded by private foundations in 2017, only 0.42% of grants went to feminist movements and women’s rights organizing. This trend is replicated for government funding. Out of the USD153 billions of international development funding from multilateral and bilateral donors in 2018, only 0.13% went to WROs.



Embedded explicitly in our funding is an assumption that if women's funds have resources to invest in their organizational infrastructure, they will be more resilient. Our operating hypothesis is that when women's funds are resilient, they are positioned to respond to the needs of movements, adapt to an ever-changing environment, and rise to meet new opportunities. Their resilience is important to sustaining the action of movements in advancing gender justice worldwide.

The Fenomenal Funds model is predicated on experimentation across three modalities: one, a pooled fund; two, shared governance between private foundations and women's funds; and three, feminist participatory grant-making. We see our approach as a new way for women's funds and private foundations to collaborate as peers through a [system of shared governance](#) guided by the Astraea Foundation's [feminist funding principles](#). These three modalities combine to test our second assumption, that if women's funds and private foundations exercise equal power in determining who gets what, who does what, who decides what, and who sets the agenda, then resources will be responsive to the needs of women's funds and their priorities. As a result, funding processes will be transparent, more accountable, and lead to better outcomes.

Ultimately, our aim is that the lessons and insights from our model contribute to efforts by other actors in the ecosystem to catalyze change towards a more responsive funding ecosystem that **unlocks more and better resources for gender justice movements.**

4 AWID (2013), WomanKind (2017), MamaCash (ND)



REPORT PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY



This report focuses on the first two rounds of Resilience Grants and our emerging learnings and curiosities. As we go forward, some of our learnings and curiosities will be affirmed and some of them will be redirected or discarded.

The purpose of this report is three-fold:

- 1. We want to be accountable to women's funds.** We have a privileged position of being able to discern aggregated trends from the individual journeys of women's funds over the past two years. While, in time, we hope to undertake a process of collective sense-making to glean the insights of each granting round, for now, this report brings together the observations of the Fenomenal Funds staff team, bolstered by the perspectives of the Advisory Committee and the Steering Committee, which include the voices of women's funds and private foundations.
- 2. We want to be propositional to colleagues in philanthropy,** to share our insights from doing philanthropy differently and to offer alternative ways of doing philanthropy, most particularly exploring the threads of 'power with'⁵ rather than 'power over'.
- 3. We want to name some curiosities about our emerging practice** to establish some areas that we hypothesize might be interesting to explore further as the collaborative evolves.

5 We have been guided by Srilatha Batliwala's [Power Primer](#) and the definitions of different types of power. In this report we reference power over (the use of institutions or people to exert, often dominating, power over others), power with (the power of the collective to create positive change), and power under (the experience that arises when people who have been powerless access power positions and a) are afraid they will lose it, b) try to hold on to that power by being dominant or aggressive, and c) continue with behaviors they used to survive their earlier experience of power over (sabotage, subversion, false flattery, gossip etc).

The insights we share in this report bring together data and reflections from our first two rounds of grant-making. We have drawn on the information provided by women’s funds in their applications and reports to us. We had a total applicant pool of forty women’s funds members of Prospera INWF – a mix of multi-regional (10) and regional and national funds (Africa - 6; Asia and the Pacific - 6; Europe - 11; and Latin America - 8).

RESILIENCE GRANTS

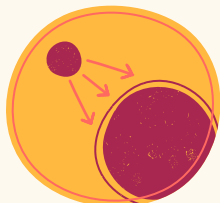
Number of women’s funds grant-recipients

BY REGION



	ROUND 1 2020-2021	ROUND 2 2022-2023
Africa	6	6
Asia-Pacific	4	6
Europe	11	11
Latin America	8	8
Multi-regional	9	10
Total	38	41

BY SCALE



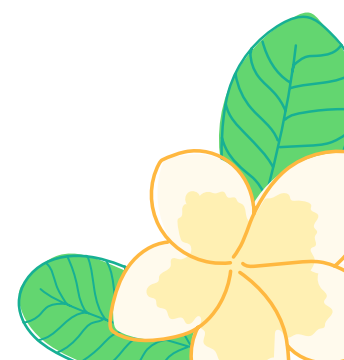
National	17	19
Regional/subregional	12	12
Multi-regional	9	10
Total	38	41

BY ANNUAL BUDGET

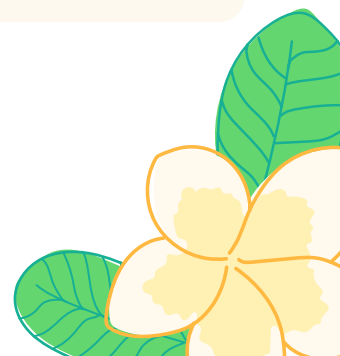
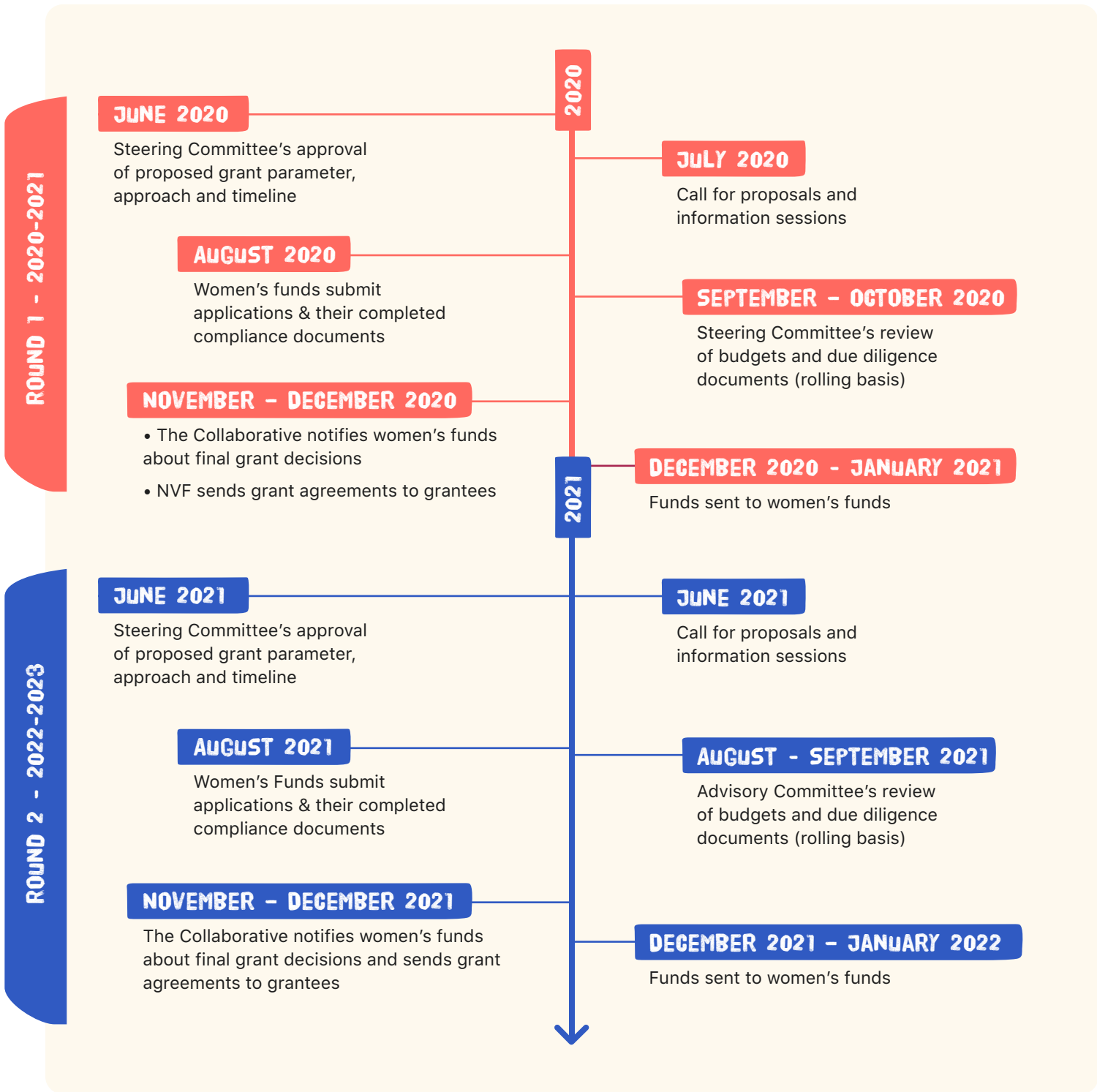


Small (<500K)*	14	16
Lower-medium (500K - 1M)*	5	5
Upper-medium (1M - 3M)*	10	11
Large (>3M)*	9	9
Total	38	41

* All amounts are in USD.



RESILIENCE GRANTS TIMELINE

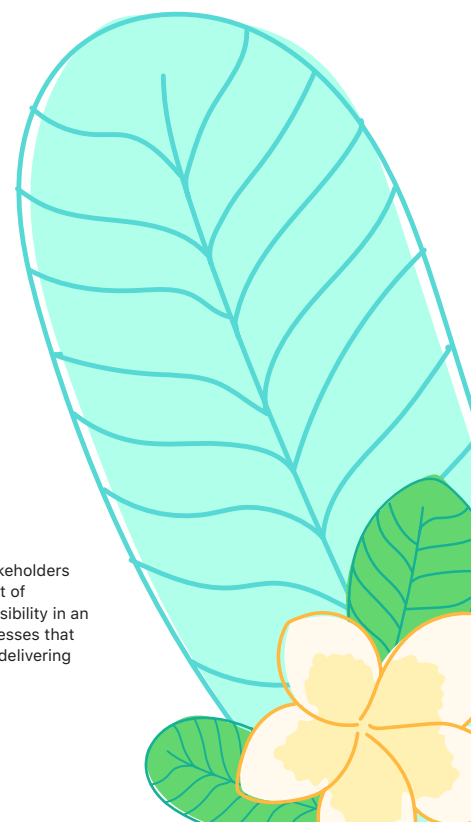


As a collaborative, we are committed to transformational practice. We have adopted a Feminist Emergent Learning framework to support our learning process, and invested in our organizational infrastructure and systemic processes to facilitate real-time learning.⁶ Our deep dive into the data was supported by the qualitative software package [MAXQDA](#) and theoretical framings for sorting data drawn from the Oxfam Canada [Feminist Capacity Assessment Tool](#) and the Ford Foundation's [Organizational Mapping Tool](#).

In addition to data sensemaking by Fenomenal Funds staff, we also drew from reflections of the Fenomenal Funds Steering Committee and Advisory Committee on the evolution of our collaborative model, and the difference it makes to the practice of feminist, transformative philanthropic grant-making.

Sharing the emerging learnings and curiosities in a public form, is part of our feminist politics of transformation, transparency, and accountability. **We share these early insights in a spirit of trust, and hope they will be received in a spirit of generosity.**

⁶ Fenomenal Funds is experimenting with a feminist emergent learning framework, which enables us to work in co-creation with stakeholders to constantly evolve our hypotheses on transforming the funding ecosystem. We are committed to this as part of our political project of decolonizing both philanthropy and monitoring, evaluation and learning. We view this approach as both an opportunity and a responsibility in an organization that exists to experiment with power. It is imperative that we learn as we go. To that end, we have built systematic processes that are deeply embedded in our organization to bring insights of value along the journey that enable real-time adjustments, rather than delivering insights only at the end, when it is too late for us to course correct.



HOW A MODEL THAT DISRUPTS POWER PIVOTS IN A PANDEMIC



WE'VE BEEN INTERESTED IN POWER FLOWS FROM THE START...

Before we explore what we've learned about building the resilience of women's funds, it is useful to pause for a moment to examine the Fenomenal Funds model itself. A fuller reflective process is underway and will be shared in the future. But the story of how the model contributed to a pivot in the 'what' and 'how' of the Resilience Grants is an important part of the context.

From the outset, Fenomenal Funds has been interested in disrupting traditional power structures in philanthropy. Fenomenal Funds is predicated on challenging the 'power over' model of private foundations making decisions alone. Therefore, our decision-making model is an experiment in 'power with': of sharing strategic and grant-making decision-making between women's funds and private foundations. We are putting into practice what the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) has described as a balanced funding ecosystem.⁷ Every day, we are challenging and unlearning the practices of patriarchal and neo-colonial power. Sometimes we flow. Sometimes we falter. But we are always in process.

7 AWID has been exploring the idea of a balanced ecosystem: "a funding ecosystem is composed of those leading social change (activists, organizations, networks, and movements) and those who support their work (philanthropic funders, governments, activists themselves self-generating resources etc.). ...A balanced ecosystem is one in which feminist activists themselves have the power to define funding priorities iteratively and in dialogue with funders. Our vision is to eventually shift power equations between women's funds and funders in the ecosystem towards decolonizing philanthropy."



...AND WE'VE BUILT A MODEL THAT DISRUPTS POWER...

Presently, Fenomenal Funds has a Steering Committee with responsibility for strategy and oversight, and an Advisory Committee to guide participatory grant-making. Both entities have a mixed membership of private funds, women's funds, and the Secretariat of the Prospera INWF. The Steering Committee has an equal balance between private funds and women's funds, while the decision-making balance in the Advisory Committee favors women's funds.

Women's funds are elected by their peers to both the Steering Committee and the Advisory Committee, with consideration given to representing the diversity of the members of the Prospera INWF – in terms of size, scope, and scale. There is also recourse to mechanisms for ad hoc consultation as needed. The Fenomenal Funds staff team⁸ facilitates the work of the Fund. New Venture Fund acts as the fiscal sponsor, providing back-office support in HR, finance, and legal services.

...BY RECONCEPTUALIZING THE EXERCISE OF POWER.

Our premise is that, by building a mechanism that facilitates the equal exercise of power, we will engender more robust decision-making and better outcomes. The equal exercise of power means that decisions made are informed, in real-time, by the experience, knowledge, and perspectives of women's funds and, it is hypothesized, will be more responsive to the context, needs, and realities of women's funds. Our work is contributing to building a more balanced feminist funding ecosystem where the recipients of funding decisions (in this case the women's funds and the Secretariat of Prospera INWF) as well as those contributing financial and other resources (private foundations) exercise equal power in the collaborative's decision making processes.⁹ Together, they decide on both the strategy and distribution of funding, and navigate how to meet the needs, responsibilities, and aspirations of all stakeholders.

Our curiosity is how this played out in reality during the launch of our first and second grant making rounds. We plan to share lessons and insights into the thinking and experiences of the Advisory Committee and the Steering Committee in another publication. However, for now, we highlight how the shared governance model supported the pivots, both in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and in service of our experiments with the equal exercise of power.

OUR GRANT-MAKING AND DECISION-MAKING IS POWER WITH AND BETWEEN...

The first significant pivot was the Steering Committee's decision to adopt a non-competitive and equitable approach to grant-making. Both components are important and speak to the projects of feminist power sharing (non-competitive grants) and the pursuit of decoloniality of unjust resource flows within and between communities and nation states (equitable grants). A key feature of neo-liberalism has been to drive the premise of free-market competition. By determining that all women's funds in the Prospera INWF would have equal access to a portion of the funds available in the grant-making round, the Fenomenal

⁸ The team is four-people strong and includes communications, grants management, evaluation and learning, and strategy and management functions.

⁹ We are grounded in the work convened by AWID and the Count Me In! Consortium (CMI!) who have created a vision of "a system that is able to adapt to respond effectively to change and adapt successfully to new and unforeseen circumstances while staying true to mission."



Funds Steering Committee challenged a central tenet of neoliberalism. We put into practice new economic principles based on cultures of sharing rather than the cultures of competition. One governance member observed that the approach enabled a more collaborative and thoughtful process to emerge.

Steering Committee members also reflected on the importance of the shared governance model in enabling this approach to emerge as Fenomenal Funds grappled with the impact of the pandemic. One member spoke of the way in which shared governance grounded, in real time, the immense challenges that funds were experiencing as they responded to the overwhelming nature of COVID-19. She reflected that the enormity of their experience would likely have filtered through to the foundations at some point, maybe six months down the track. But the shared governance of Fenomenal Funds meant that the Steering Committee could immediately respond to the imperative to pivot: by adopting an approach that enabled them to get the money “out the door” with reduced bureaucracy (streamlined application process and altered MEL requirements) during a period characterized by intense time pressures, external stressors, and limited bandwidth.

...AND THROUGH.

This type of thinking continued as we entered 2021 with a pandemic divide between the global South and the global North. In the global North, the availability of vaccines, medical services, and social services provided a sense that the tide was turning. In the global South, however, people were struggling to get oxygen and basic health services, with a distant hope for access to vaccines.

Although the Advisory Committee started the year focused on designing a process for the Collaboration Grants, as we approached the launch, it was obvious that engaging women’s funds in a co-creation process for Collaboration Grants would be counterproductive under the current circumstances of the pandemic. Inviting women’s funds into a process that demanded time to connect and design their collaboration during a period of such intense pressure would doom the experiment to failure. The Collaboration Grants process was postponed, and instead, the immediate needs of women’s funds became the priority. Thus, our shared governance model continued to allow real-time insights from women’s funds – and their challenges in the context of COVID-19 – to inform the Advisory Committee’s strategic thinking. The Advisory Committee enabled a rebalancing of needs – by centering the needs of women’s funds. This led to a recalibrated focus in favor of a reflexive grant round that provided Resilience Grants to women’s funds.

Fenomenal Funds prioritized flexible, multi-year resources, which used a light-touch, trust-based, application process that respected the crisis context and bandwidth capacities of women’s funds. The questions for the second round focused on understanding the impact of the pandemic on women’s funds¹⁰, the strategic adjustments in response to the pandemic, and self-determined priorities for the second round of funding. Following a collaborative process among Advisory Committee members to review and discuss applications, the Steering Committee and Advisory Committee met together to discuss the grant-making recommendations and approve the grants.

¹⁰ See the following section for our insights on patterns within and across regions and scales of funds.



The Advisory Committee and the staff team were also curious to reframe the power dynamics of the application process and provided more substantive reflections. These included what the Advisory Committee found exciting and inspiring about each application, insights on the areas of focus, as well as areas for further consideration. This process was seen by the women's funds as contributing to their own sense of resilience and affirmed the directions they were taking:



The feedback is very humbling and gives us motivation to continue...”

- Women's Fund Armenia



Thank you so very much - to the Steering Committee and the Advisory Committee of Fenomenal Funds - for this decision and for the trust that you are placing in us to use these funds as the fund itself sees fit.”

- Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises



The thoughtful, feminist, and generous support of Fenomenal Funds is such an important anchor of resilience for us and our community.”

- Global Fund for Women

Several funds noted the sense of solidarity that emerged from knowing their peers had both reviewed their proposals and made suggestions on strengthening their approaches.



NONETHELESS, THE REALITIES OF WORKLOAD AND SORTING THROUGH SCOPE OF WORK HAVE SOMETIMES BEEN HARD TO NAVIGATE...

Fenomenal Funds was launched on the goodwill and good grace of the Steering Committee and their institutional bases. While each women's fund received a contribution to institutional budgets in recognition of the time taken up in support of Fenomenal Funds, the Steering Committee members made significant contributions to both strategy and operations in the early days, above and beyond what was expected of them. The workload was unsustainable. The appointment of a staff team was a critical moment that enabled Steering Committee members to step out of day-to-day work into the strategic role that had been envisaged. With a resourced staff team supporting the fund, progress was made on institutionalizing a participatory grant-making model, continuing to build trust, and getting money out the door.

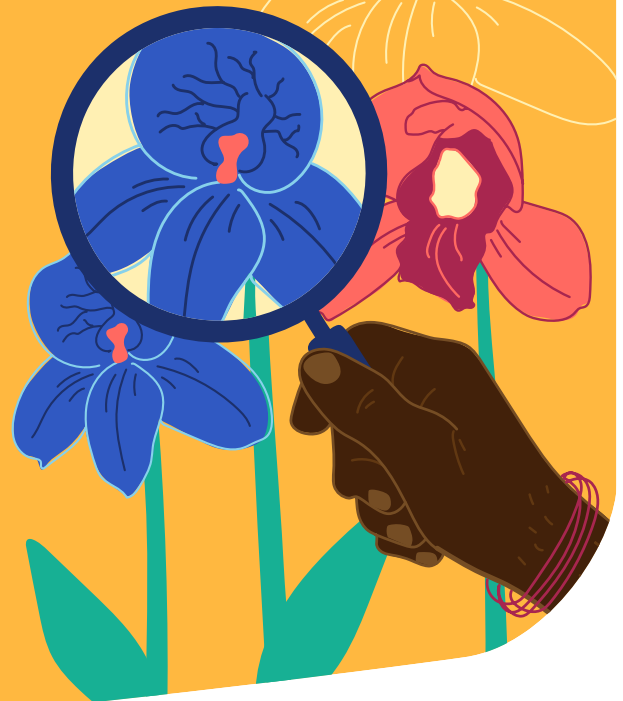
In all of this, there has been an element of 'building the plane while flying it' which has, from time-to-time, resulted in some lack of clarity in roles and scope of work. Transitioning from a 'power over' ethos to one of 'power with' is challenging at the best of times, and made more difficult during this period when face-to-face meetings were not possible. As feminists, we are on a path of continual curiosity about the ways in which patriarchal power plays: the 'power over' of traditional hierarchies and formal and informal positional authorities, the distorted 'power under' manifestations of past damage and ongoing (most often data-informed) wariness of placing trust in a process, trip up our 'power with' aspirations.

...AND WE'RE EXCITED TO SEE WHERE THEY TAKE US.

We are excited to continue our experiments in shared governance, having already created a rich data set to validate our assumption that a shared governance model will facilitate efforts toward decoloniality of power. By changing who decides what, who gets what, who sets the agenda, and who does what, decision-making and relationships are rooted in equity and justice (power with) in contrast to traditional systems of power over.



WHEN WE EXAMINE CONTEXT, WHAT DO WE LEARN?



While we prioritized a light-touch approach to the application process, we nonetheless collected a rich set of data on the impacts of the pandemic on the internal and external contexts in which women’s funds operate. In the same way that we shared peer comments back to the funds on their applications, our feminist emergent learning framework enables us to also be accountable back to women’s funds on what we are learning from them.

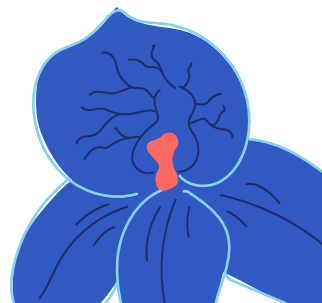
So, what did we learn about women’s funds’ operating contexts from the women’s funds themselves?

“A DEVASTATING INTERSECTION OF COMPOUNDING CRISES”

Fundamentally, the world has become increasingly complex. In addition to the strength of patriarchal systems, women’s funds are embedded in a complex web of intersecting social and political issues – racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism and casteism to name a few, all of which were exacerbated by COVID-19.

EXTERNALLY, CIVIC SPACE IS SHRINKING, AND AUTHORITARIANISM IS RISING...

Globally, civil society space is shrinking, and authoritarianism is on the rise, with increased surveillance, restrictive legislation, and encroachments on civil liberties - a trend exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic:





...the public health risks created by COVID-19 are strategically used by the government as an excuse for implementing new, excessive measures limiting freedom of assembly and spontaneous protests. ”

- FemFund Poland

Security challenges and risks also became more prevalent (including cyber, physical, psychological, and financial violence and risks). For example, some women's funds told us that the pandemic brought with it an increased military and police footprint, escalating serious and systematic human rights violations. In response, within the constraints of their own available resources, they increased resourcing available to enable movement partners to self-determine their own best strategies.

...FINANCIAL RESTRICTIONS ARE INHIBITING THE FLOW OF RESOURCES TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS...

As part of the increased regulation of civil society organizations, governments around the world introduced increasingly complicated financial restrictions, which women's funds reported as challenging the receipt and disbursement of funds in Latin America, Central Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and Asia.

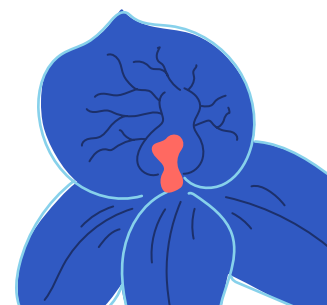
...CLIMATE CHANGE AND OTHER DISASTERS ARE HAVING INCREASINGLY DETRIMENTAL IMPACTS...

Many women's funds reported an increased need for resource mobilization to address the effects of climate change and disasters, including to ensure care for the wellbeing of impacted movement partners and women's fund staff.

...EXAGGERBATED FOR THOSE LIVING AND WORKING IN SITUATIONS OF WAR AND CONFLICT.

Likewise, several women's funds highlighted the compounding complexities of working and continuing to meet movement partner needs in the face of war, internal and cross-border conflict, diminished security,¹¹ and at the intersections of patriarchy, authoritarianism, and economic failure.

¹¹ See briefings from the International Crisis Group for context: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latest-updates/special-briefing>



COVID-19 INTERSECTING WITH PATRIARCHY AND NEO-COLONIALISM RAMPED UP EXISTING GENDER AND RACIAL INEQUALITIES...

Patriarchy, the ongoing racism and coloniality within and between communities and nation states, and COVID-19 have been a perfect storm. This has profoundly, and negatively, affected the lives of the activists that women's funds support, as well as the staff of the women's funds themselves. In addition to the pandemic's high death toll, national and regional women's funds observed increased violence against women and trans people. This included increased extrajudicial killings in communities, and increased invasions on traditional territories. Widespread economic crises spiked unemployment and economic hardships, leading to increased poverty, food insecurity and hunger. Women's funds also reported a lack of basic health and social welfare services (with gender-based attacks on sexual and reproductive health and rights) and the exacerbated health risk of continuing to work if remote work was not possible.

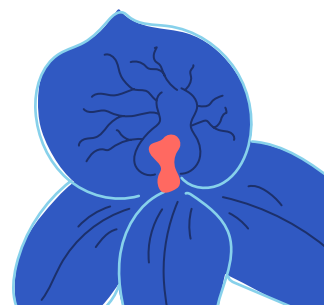
...REDIRECTED FUNDS FROM WOMEN'S FUNDS TO COVID-19 RESPONSES...

Many women's funds reported a rapid decline in funding, including long-term, flexible, and sustained support, alongside resources raised through in-person fundraising events. The loss of funding was particularly noticeable for trans-led and LGBTQI groups, who in some instances were excluded from COVID-19 relief programs because they are seen as illegal entities or are ignored by the state. For example, the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice reported that many agencies, especially large corporate foundations, shifted funds to COVID-19 relief and rehabilitation. Concerningly, while funding for gender equality work declined, the most recent Global Philanthropy Project report on funding for the 'anti-gender' movement tracked an increase of funding available for anti-LGBTQI, anti-feminist movements, and fundamentalist right-wing organizations during the pandemic¹².

...AND MADE FOR MORE CHALLENGING INTERNAL CONTEXTS AMONG THE WOMEN'S FUNDS.

These external factors impacted the internal environment of women's funds, with a range of issues reported. For instance, increasingly precarious financial contexts (which led in some instances to staff redundancies); detrimental COVID-19-related impacts on planned leadership transitions; workload-associated staff burnout; concomitant staff turnover; and difficulties adjusting to working from home and online. All the while, funds were working diligently to meet the increased resource needs of grassroots movements.

¹² Global Philanthropy Project. (2021). Meet the Moment: A Call for Progressive Philanthropic Response to the Anti-Gender Movement <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/2020/11/12/meet-the-moment/>



WOMEN'S FUNDS SELF-DETERMINED INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE PRIORITIES



Having pivoted to non-competitive grants, we were in a position to explore the next part of our hypothesis: that, if women's funds of the Prospera INWF have flexible institutional funding provided in a non-competitive peer-led process then they will strengthen their organizational resilience by investing in their individual institutional infrastructure.

It is early days, but our first two rounds of funding have clearly demonstrated the validity of this first hypothesis: women's funds have creatively and strategically used Fenomenal Funds resources to invest in their own organizational infrastructure, which in turn, has given them the ability to adapt to a changing context.

WHEN WOMEN'S FUNDS ARE FUNDED TO INVEST IN INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING...

To navigate intersecting external crises, women's funds know they must strengthen their own internal processes and structures. Yet they face very real challenges as their primary funding tends to be project-based and directed towards the groups and movements they support.

Our hypothesis is that, given the resources to invest in their capacity, women's funds will invest in institutional strengthening, which will, in turn, ensure they can continue to resource and support gender justice movements on the frontlines.



Our review of data from our first two years of grant-making shows that flexible, core funding (in the form of the Fenomenal Funds Resilience Grants) has afforded women’s funds a vital opportunity to invest in their own infrastructure – in their people, frameworks and systems, and assets. In short, women’s funds have proven our first contention: when they have the resources, women’s funds prioritize specific areas of their individual organizational infrastructure.

...THEY PRIORITIZE THEIR PEOPLE...

While the pandemic provided the context for Fenomenal Fund’s decision-making on the form and content of the Resilience Grants, one of the most striking findings from the grant data is the extent to which women’s funds used the flexible funding to meet basic staff costs. **Almost 75% of the funds who received Resilience Grants used some of their funds to cover core staff costs and, to a lesser degree, to bring on new staff to address workload concerns or bring in new skillsets.** This trend was evident in both years of grant allocation irrespective of the size and location of the fund (though it was particularly pronounced for national women’s funds), indicating that pressures on meeting core staff costs exist generally, not just within the context of a pandemic.

Another very clear trend from the data (see Figure 1) was the allocation of funding to wellbeing benefits:

HUMAN RESOURCE ALLOCATION

by Scale of Fund



Across scales, women’s funds are allocating resources toward human resources.

- Multi-regional
- Regional
- Subregional
- National

Specific priorities include:

Wellbeing Benefits

Staff Salaries

New + Replacement Staff

Leadership

Salary increases



FIGURE 1

As with others around the world, the pandemic placed women's funds' staff in situations of increased pressure, such as the impact and management of lockdown measures and a pivot to remote working. Remote work took on a particularly gendered dimension as women shouldered the disproportionate impacts of care work during these times (and the majority of women's fund team members identify as women). Pressures associated with increased workloads intensified as funds grappled with resourcing movement partners to address the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and other intersecting crises. The Ecumenical Women's Fund Croatia described the experience of their team:



With a small staff, the pressure of delivery was keenly felt as working days regularly exceeded normal hours, fundraising was stepped up, and difficult conversations and planning around restructuring existing budgets to meet emerging needs and priorities became ongoing. Time spent in communication with our grantees increased dramatically as they turned to us for support and advice. Our own action plans were in a constant state of flux as a result of COVID-19 related factors beyond our control, as we endeavored to provide tangible support to women's grassroots organizations. With women's vulnerability increasing, they looked to us for support to overcome major funding challenges, burnout, and anxiety. As we moved to maintain our programs and commitment to be the continual and stable source of support they needed, we became aware of our own weaknesses and unpreparedness for times of crisis.



This was echoed in the insights of the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights:



Our staff navigated lockdowns, remote work, childcare and family care responsibilities, adjusted to less-than-ideal workspaces such as small apartments, shared spaces, dining tables, and closet set-ups for a much longer period than any of us anticipated. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a surge in our grant-making due to increased needs and demands by women, trans, and gender non-conforming human rights defenders. This meant that our team faced increased workloads at a time of global upheaval and widespread anxiety. Our staff were dealing with concerns about the health risks of a novel virus, juggling personal responsibilities with professional deliverables, and the negative impact of COVID-19 related public health restrictions on wellbeing and social interaction.

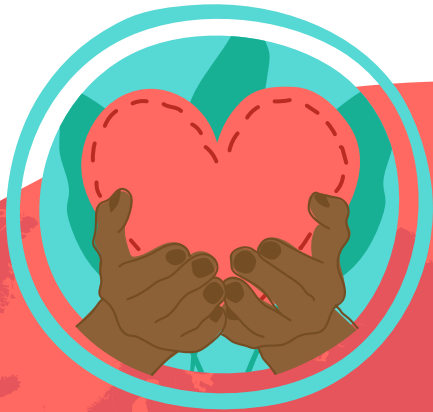


Fenomenal Funds Resilience Grants enabled women’s funds to address these concerns. Women’s funds directed resources towards activities that supported their staff to manage the personal and familial health risks of COVID-19. This included first-time opportunities for some of the smaller funds to provide staff with basic benefits such as health insurance, and funding to support private transportation to and from work in order to alleviate the health concerns associated with navigating public transportation. Women’s Fund Asia made allocations from their Resilience Grant towards reimbursing staff for the COVID-19 test and vaccinations, covering additional medical and wellbeing costs incurred by team members, and planning group support with professional psychosocial support.

The Resilience Grants also supported some funds – particularly regional funds – to resource their emerging institutional wellness policies and frameworks to nurture staff as they navigated implausible work-life balance scenarios at a time of increased workload and financial uncertainty.

STAFF WELL-BEING

by Scale of Fund



Women’s funds allocated resources to support staff well-being.

- Multi-regional
- Regional
- Subregional
- National

Specific priorities include:

- Policies and Practices
- Direct benefits and resources
- Well-being training

FIGURE 2



Intrinsic to this approach is articulating a definition of the context for, and the practice of, care. The grant data suggests that this interest is present across the regions. Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe (FAU-AL) set out the following approach:



There is no single or correct formula for practicing and understanding care as it is contextual, diverse, and rooted in culture and experiences, and in personal and collective memory. Our approach emphasizes the importance of collective protection and its cultural practices, particularly those of indigenous peoples and people of African descent. Caring for ourselves involves multiple dimensions, including digital spaces. Recognizing its relevance to working online, we have developed the concept of digital care and a digital body to expand on traditional approaches to digital security.



Funds explored different ways of institutionalizing an individual and collective care framework. For example, Fondo de Mujeres del Sur (FMS) used part of their Resilience Grant to create and implement an internal ‘Individual and Collective Care Policy’, which they developed using a participatory approach. As part of this, collective care initiatives were covered and then complemented by supporting all team members to access self-care activities of their choice. FMS also improved its emergency and health insurance policies. Urgent Action Fund Asia and Pacific used part of their grant for the provision of psychosocial support¹³ for team members and designed collective care policies which address individual and collective needs both externally with movements and internally for the fund’s staff.

...BUILD THEIR ASSETS...

The pandemic made obvious the need for women’s funds to build the financial resilience required to navigate unanticipated crises. Women’s funds invested in three major areas to achieve this: increasing resource mobilization capacity such as staffing and communications, the creation of financial reserves, and purchasing assets.

¹³ This includes counseling and coaching for staff members.



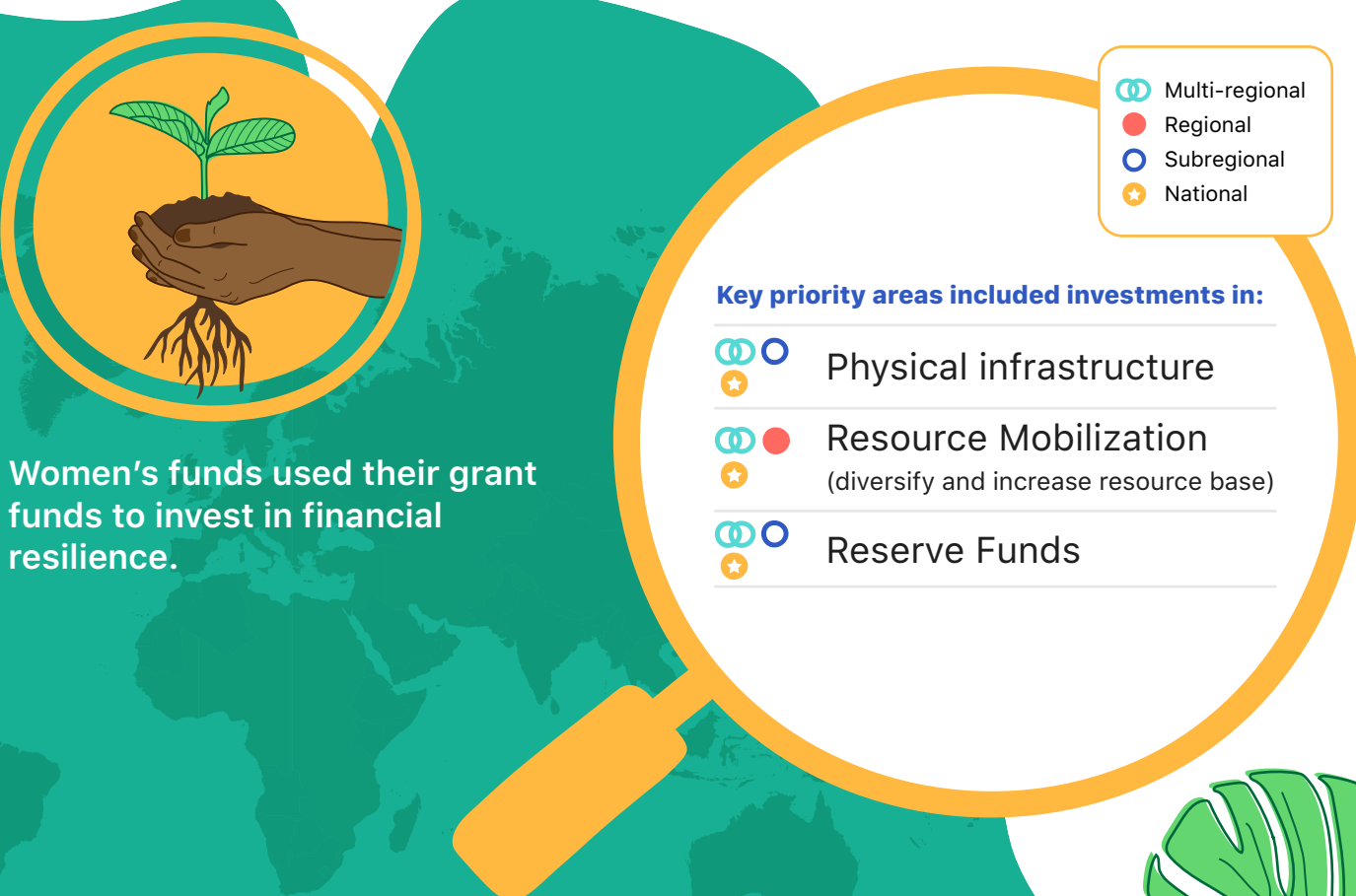
...RE-INVEST IN RESOURCE MOBILIZATION TO GROW THE POOL OF FUNDS FOR MOVEMENT PARTNERS...

National funds, in particular, used Fenomenal Funds Resilience Grants to support resource mobilization efforts. One fund reported that the ability to self-direct funds meant they were able to increase staffing of their resource mobilization work, which saw a 211% increase in their income. It demonstrates the value of women's funds being able to both determine strategic need, and act on it. For too many funds, the diversion of staff into meeting movement partners' urgent needs meant that limited allocation of time and expertise towards resource mobilization was, of necessity, deprioritized. The project-based nature of the women's funds funding also meant that as projects were finalized, the funds faced a resource crisis. Access to flexible funding supported women's funds to address these challenges. The Resilience Grants demonstrated the value of flexible funding: across all levels of funds (national, regional and multi-regional) women's funds allocated at least part of their grant to resource mobilization activities, particularly to expand or diversify funding sources.

FIGURE 3

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY


by Scale of Fund



...GROW THEIR RESERVES TO BETTER WEATHER UNCERTAINTY...

Women's funds also used the Resilience Grants to address another key financial sustainability foundation: the accumulation of reserves as a financial resilience management strategy. The project-based nature of the grants received by women's funds significantly and negatively affects their ability to build the operational reserves that enable them to manage cash flow challenges associated with contracting delays and unexpected circumstances.

Many of the women's funds used their Resilience Grant to build their financial reserves. Some funds allocated 100% of their grant in both years towards their reserves, while others allocated ranges of 20 - 50%, and sought expert resource mobilization and investment management advice. Women's Fund Fiji described their situation, and their plans to use the initial investment to build a buffer while seeking a local solution to the issue in the longer-term:

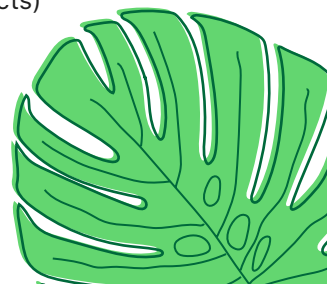


We really want to work towards encouraging local philanthropy to help us build our reserves. We feel that strengthening our financial resilience contributes to the overall organizational resilience [...] while we have diversified our resources, we are still heavily reliant on one bilateral donor. As we have transitioned into becoming an independent entity, we have now engaged in new contracting arrangements with two bilateral donors. It is important for us to build our financial reserves. Currently, we have received some funds from non-bilateral donors to create our reserves and as such, should there be changes or delays in new contracting, we will have some financial ability to continue operations in the short-term. However, given the high cost of running an organization, we will continue to seek financial support from existing and new donors to increase our reserves level.

”

Similarly, Women Win shared that “maintaining reserves is also part of our plans to boost our resource mobilization efforts since it demonstrates responsible financial management and increases funders’ confidence in our ability to carry out their missions.”

Funds reflected that reserve funds enable them to continue their work, to mitigate threats and damages and also ensure liquidity to manage grants and grant-making, especially in the face of their ongoing resistance to the closing civil society space and increased governmental attacks. For example, the African Women's Development Fund shared that the Resilience Grant “enabled us to grow our reserve fund which gave us the flexibility to be more resilient, supplement funding limitations (including pre-financing projects) as well as to meet certain COVID-19 core expenses during the period.”



...AND INVEST IN ASSETS THAT SUPPORT FEMINIST MOVEMENTS.

In addition to reserves and endowments, some funds invested in the purchase of movable and immovable assets. For example, Women's Fund Armenia, a national women's fund, allocated resources from both grant cycles towards purchasing a safe space they are developing for their community of feminist activists. They also intend to purchase a vehicle to facilitate access to the space for those who need it. Across both grant cycles, Women's Fund in Georgia also pooled their existing resources with an allocation from the Resilience Grant to support the construction of a feminist residency. These investments are usually not possible for women's funds to make as the funding they receive is usually tied to specific projects or for grant-making. The flexibility built into the Resilience Grants allowed women's funds to explore these types of investments.

WOMEN'S FUNDS ALSO INVESTED IN THEIR FRAMEWORKS AND SYSTEMS...

Women's funds also invested in their frameworks and systems by hiring external consultants to augment their significantly stretched internal staffing capacity. This enabled funds to, for example, advance initiatives that would otherwise have fallen behind as staff responded to increased demand for support from their movements, alongside the complexities of the internal and external contexts.

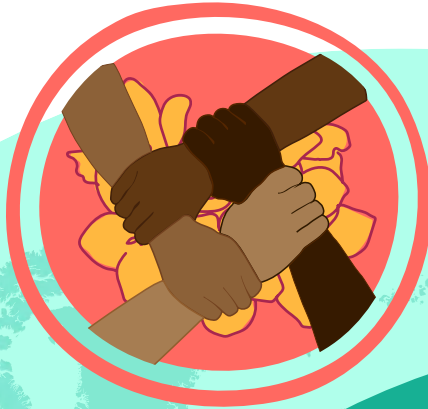
Among Prospera INWF members, we saw investments supporting strategic planning (a significant trend across the funds). Women's funds also prioritized work on communications strategies, resource mobilization strategies (most common among the European funds), monitoring, evaluation and learning (more common among European and Latin American funds). In addition, they prioritized hiring technical expertise related to human resource management (particularly around wellbeing, as previously summarized, and compensation), as well as digital security. Funds reported that this investment in organizational processes and digitizing operations has improved their workflow making their systems more user-friendly, freeing up valuable staff time that was refocused into long-term strategizing and stakeholder engagement. Figure 4 shows the breadth of consultant engagements.

We posit that, in some instances, consultants were engaged when the cost of maintaining their technical expertise in-house would have been beyond the reach of the women's funds. We noted this trend across the two grant cycles and anticipate it will continue as a trend as women's funds focus on institutional strengthening work.



CONSULTANCIES

by Scale of Fund



Women’s funds allocated resources to secure technical support and additional human resources support by hiring consultants in a wide range of areas.

Specific priorities include:

- Multi-regional
- Regional
- Subregional
- National

PEOPLE

- Human Resources Management
- Staff wellbeing
- Leadership Transitions

RESOURCES

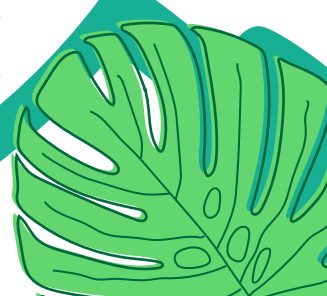
- Financial Management
- Resource mobilization
- Emergency Fund
- Communications/Branding/Narrative

PROGRAM

- Grantmaking
- MERL/KM
- Advocacy/Networking

ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

- Organizational Development/Restructuring
- Strategic Planning
- Research/needs assessment
- IT/Cyber Security
- Legal Services
- Process Management



...PARTICULARLY DIGITAL SYSTEMS AND SECURITY.

Women’s funds have consistently pointed to the challenges of increased government regulation and closing civil society space as a constraint on their work – and this plays out particularly in the realm of digital security. Increasingly, funds are required to invest in more sophisticated systems that will safeguard both the movement partners and the women’s funds in an increasingly adverse online environment. Of course, digital competency and digital security needs were amplified as the pandemic pushed a number of funds to remote operations. Funds also noted the detrimental impacts on staff and movement partners of spending so much time in online spaces, which they sought to address both through investments in digital systems, as well as integrating it into their wellbeing plans.

A number of funds, particularly regional funds, transitioned to digital workspaces prior to the pandemic, and they were in a much better position to pivot to the work-specific needs and restrictions imposed by lockdowns. However, those organizations (often national funds) who did not have the resources, infrastructure, or organizational culture associated with remote work found this to be a challenging transition, particularly as the charges for IT professionals skyrocketed in the face of increased demand. The data shows that 50% of funds invested in their digital infrastructure, however, and as Figure 5 shows, the greatest allocations were made by national funds.

DIGITAL SYSTEMS & SECURITY

by Scale of Fund



Women’s funds used resources to improve digital systems and security.

- Multi-regional
- Regional
- Subregional
- National

Specific priorities include:

- Equipment and online software
- IT and digital security consultants
- Digital security training

Investments by funds include the purchase of software, hiring external experts to address cyber security vulnerabilities, and setting up internal communications systems. For example, the Global Fund for Women shared that they plan to use the Resilience Grant to “invest in cyber security to ensure that our data and our partners’ data is safe and secure, and to mitigate the effects of a potential data breach, including by purchasing cyber security insurance.” We anticipate that these investments will continue as hybrid work becomes the norm. This creates a challenge as funds work to accommodate the costs of both physical and digital workspaces.

AND THEY’VE DRAWN DEEPLY FROM THE WELL OF COLLECTIVE POWER AND SHARED WISDOM...

In addition to exploring the ways in which Resilience Grants were directed towards concrete strategies, several funds spoke to the non-tangible benefits that accrued. For example, the value of both the application process and the funding period, and the way it enabled them to reflect strategically on their own capacity strengthening – knowing that funds would be forthcoming to implement their findings in the long term:



The grant allowed us to have a sense of stability. Frankly, after years we were pleased to have an opportunity to look at our capacities (what we are as a fund, what are our strengths and weaknesses/limits, where we want to be and what we need to do in order to develop and grow as a human rights agency), processes (what the logistics and effectivity of our work look like, how we manage and cover internal and external communication, how we plan and evaluate results, how we cooperate with others, how we mobilize and manage resources), future plans (what are our plans, how they correspond and resonate with us both personally and organizationally, what are sources of our inspiration for future plans to be identified and implemented) and collaborations and partnerships (what our collaborations look like) in a critical way.

- Slovak-Czech Women’s Fund



Funds also reported improved organizational resilience and staff's sense of security and wellbeing, that "receiving the grant felt like a gift and allowed us to focus on our internal needs and provided peace of mind" (Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises).

The Ecumenical Women's Fund Initiative reflected:



Knowing there were funders who were committed to the wellbeing of WFs, not solely in our programmes but in us, the women building, managing and leading them was a huge morale boost...Funding was secured for existing staff salaries giving huge ease of mind and security to the team.



Funds noted that this peace of mind bolstered their ability to continue to meet high work demands in a very challenging context: "The Resilience Grant allowed us to strengthen our organization which in turn allowed us to better support the Francophone women's rights movement." (XOESE - Le Fond pour les Femmes Francophones)

...WHICH MEANS THAT THE THINKING BEHIND OUR MODEL IS ON THE MONEY.

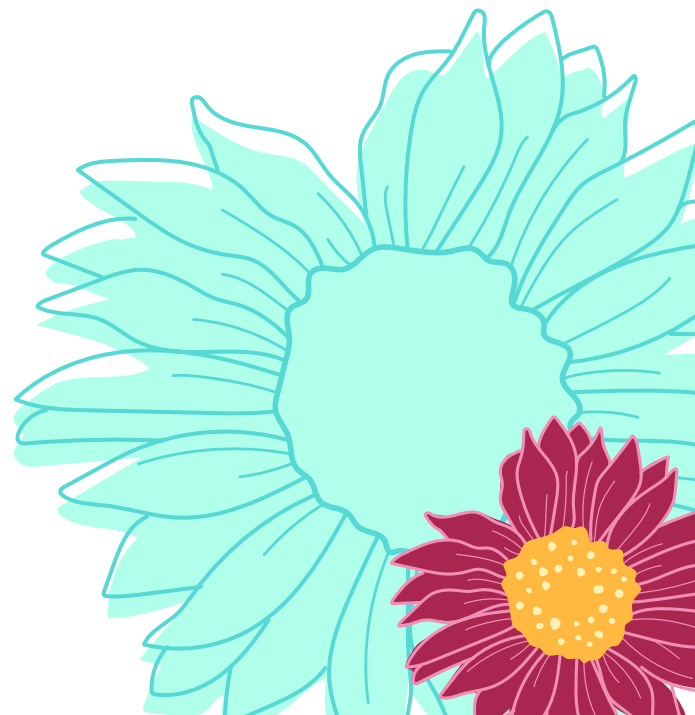
The Fenomenal Funds Resilience Grants have demonstrated the first part of our hypothesis: when presented with a non-competitive grant, women's funds invest in strategies that build up their institutional infrastructure. Our curiosity, as we move into our third grant round, is to determine whether the remainder of the hypothesis is also validated: that investments in infrastructure build up institutional and strategic capacity that, in turn, increases resilience and contributes to more robust gender justice movements.



EMERGING INSIGHTS AND CURIOSITIES FOR LEARNING AHEAD



This report captures some of our preliminary observations about the way in which our pooled funding, shared governance, and participatory grant-making model disrupts the traditional power relationships of philanthropy. In particular, we focus on the ways in which our model enabled a significant pivot and transformation of conventional ways of doing philanthropy as a result of the society-wide disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this final section, we've distilled some emerging learnings, alongside some of our curiosities about what might come next.



EMERGING INSIGHTS

WHEN WE SHARE POWER AND VOICE, DIFFERENT PRIORITIES EMERGE...

The Fenomenal Funds model of shared governance and participatory decision-making brings the voices and perspectives of women's funds to the table with private foundations. In our experience to date, this facilitated an equal exercise of power within Fenomenal Funds as a funding mechanism. Within the context of a global pandemic – this oriented our grant-making to be immediately responsive to the needs of women's funds, as opposed to the more traditional approach in which the institutional processes of the private foundations are paramount.

RECOMMENDATION



Center the voice, knowledge, and experience of grant recipients in strategy and funding decisions, so that resources address the needs and priorities of the organizations receiving the funding.

...HELPING US TO EVOLVE A MODEL THAT PROVIDES FLEXIBLE MULTI-YEAR FUNDING AND IS RESPONSIVE TO WOMEN'S FUNDS' NEEDS...

In a context of intersecting crises, the Fenomenal Funds model pivoted as women's funds and private foundations exercised equal power in our decision-making, pausing to collectively reflect on what was most important given the context of COVID-19. We were able to act on the advice of our decision-makers: that women's funds need flexible funding and should determine priorities themselves. Our analysis of the reports and proposals surfaced the strategic deployment of these resources by women's funds – most notably their focus on investments in people, systems, and assets. This priority given to human resources and financial sustainability by all funds, but particularly by national funds, met pressing needs that enabled them to adapt and strengthen their organizations in the face of a very challenging context, in turn increasing their ability to meet the needs of movement partners. In our view, these priorities point to areas where women's funds are under-resourced under more restrictive funding arrangements, leading to 'non-profit starvation'.

RECOMMENDATION



Provide flexible, multi-year funding that empowers women's funds to determine their own most pressing needs to strengthen their organizational infrastructure, particularly investments in people, systems, and assets.



...OFFERED THROUGH A NON-COMPETITIVE FUNDING APPROACH WITHIN A DEFINED ECOSYSTEM,

We found it enormously powerful to adopt an ecosystem approach – where we valued and committed to *all* women’s funds members of the Prospera INWF: those that operate nationally, regionally, and globally. Our insistence on fostering solidarity with and among women’s funds was a hallmark of our Resilience Grants. The practice of these grant rounds – to embrace a non-competitive and equitable approach – is a fundamental step towards nurturing cultures of sharing, which stands in contrast to the competitive cultures of giving. This approach is also more conducive to supporting system-level change: in other words, all parts of the ecosystem are strengthened, which benefits all regions and the movements they support.

RECOMMENDATION



Use non-competitive funding approaches that foster a culture of solidarity within a defined ecosystem.

...FACILITATED BY PARTICIPATORY GRANT-MAKING PROCESSES THAT USE A STREAMLINED APPLICATION AND REPORTING FRAMEWORK...

It is more than just the flexible and self-directed funding that matters – of equal importance is both how funding is provided, and how it is communicated and supported. Our pivots prioritized simpler and speedier applications and reporting processes. We also implemented alternative formulations of accountability and trust – a participatory process that facilitated sharing well-received feedback, highlighting what their peers found inspiring and exciting in their applications, as well as drawing on peer-insights to offer avenues for further explorations of their work. In an environment that can, at times, feel isolated, being able to place a fund’s work in the context of their peers was empowering. The streamlined reporting reduced the time burdens associated with acquitting grants and providing progress and final reports, while still enabling valuable information to be shared.

RECOMMENDATION



Use a peer-led participatory review process coupled with simple and streamlined reporting and application processes.



...WHILE DOING THE ONGOING WORK OF BUILDING TRUST.

In a funder-centered system, the ideas and assets of funders are given privilege over the knowledge and experience of women's funds and movements. That privilege and power over decisions about how money is distributed, who is eligible to get it, and what it can be used for creates mistrust and wariness that shapes the relationships between funder and recipient. When you bring funders and funding recipients together to exercise equal power in decision-making, the ongoing work of building trust is necessary to shape a new dynamic and forge new ways of engaging. It takes mental and emotional labor to reframe power dynamics among people whose relationship has been framed by a system predicated on unequal power. It calls for every person to show up with their whole selves and be open about who they are and what matters to them, personally and professionally. It calls for open and honest communication, especially courageous conversations about the things we often don't talk about, like privilege and power. It also requires listening: deep listening to the diverse perspectives that are part of the group. It also requires clear definition of roles, well-articulated processes for decision-making, and tools that facilitate how to work through any challenges. It is not easy work. Neither does it progress in a linear way. But it is necessary for real and meaningful disruption of traditional structures of power.

RECOMMENDATION



Create spaces and opportunities to build relationships and nurture trust in order to reframe power relations.



IT TAKES AN AMBITIOUS AGENDA OF POOLED INVESTMENTS TO DELIVER THE LEVEL OF FUNDING REQUIRED TO MEET THIS MOMENT...

In their proposals and reports, and through our own governance systems, the women's funds described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ways in which it gave rise to new challenges and exacerbated old ones. This changing context constitutes a fundamental challenge to realizing gender justice universally. There is more work that needs to be done. And it is ever more pressing and urgent, particularly with the rising strength of anti-LGBTQI and anti-gender justice movements. We are in a moment that calls for unprecedented levels of philanthropic investment to progress gender justice. The pooled funding of the Fenomenal Funds collaborative made it possible to release resources at an ecosystem level and in amounts that resulted in a meaningful difference. It also made it possible to remove geographic funding restrictions that often constrain funding flows to some regions, contributing to the universal efforts to realize gender justice.

RECOMMENDATION



Pool resources across funders to increase the levels of resources available to meet the scope and scale of challenges.

AND IT REQUIRES INVESTMENT IN SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES TO VALUE AND DELIVER REAL-TIME LEARNING.

We are mindful that we are charting new territory with our shared governance model and our non-competitive grants. Our feminist emergent learning framework is supporting us to engage in real time learning – in part because there are not many models we can draw from. But it is also an expression of our commitment to decoloniality of monitoring, evaluation and learning alongside our project of decoloniality of power in philanthropy. Too often, funding for learning is tagged to a mid-term or end-of-project report by an external evaluator. We are investing in organizational infrastructure (both in staffing and in consultants to walk with us as 'critical friends') to support real-time learning, enabling us to course-shift or amplify successful approaches during the life of the collaborative.

RECOMMENDATION



Invest in systems and processes that enable real-time learning and authorize those lessons to be integrated into strategy revisions and organizational process updates.



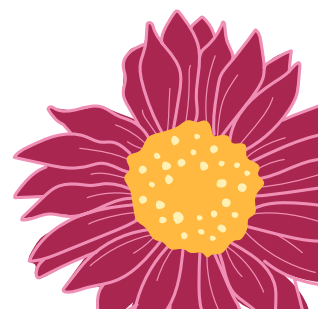
AS WE CONTINUE ON THIS JOURNEY, WE'RE CURIOUS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT...

We are both excited and inspired by the learning and insights emerging from our work. Of course, from these emerging insights we have a range of curiosities – all of which augment our existing learning hypotheses. These curiosities reflect our ongoing practice of learning. The idea is that we continue to engage in inquiry around them – sharing what we learn as we move through our learning agenda. And for those questions we have no answers to, we can engage others and learn from the wider ecosystem.



What is the impact of non-competitive and equitable flexible long-term funding? How does it affect relationships, processes, outcomes?

Three remarkable features of the Resilience Grants are that they are: (a) non-competitive in that all the women's funds in the Prospera INWF received a grant; (b) flexible funding where all the women's funds could use the funds as they saw fit for their organizational infrastructure; and (c) equitable, because all the Prospera INWF women's funds received the same grant amount. We are curious to learn more about what a non-competitive round meant to women's funds and the women's funds ecosystem. Did it engender different relationships of trust and accountability? Did it exacerbate inequality in the ecosystem? Similarly, how does it contribute to the sustainability of the funds, and does it matter, or how does it matter, when a small national women's fund receives a grant of the same amount as a large, multi-regional fund? Is the funding more meaningful to a smaller fund? And what have these rounds taught us about growing trust among collaborative stakeholders, including, between and among staff, the governance bodies, and the women's funds?





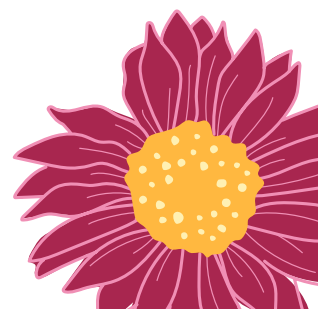
How do investments in organizational infrastructure contribute to organizational resilience?

We've seen from women's funds that they have used the funds to support a range of strengthening activities, with priority on a few key areas, namely people, systems, and assets, among other self-determined activities. What might emerge from these investments in the coming years – their impact on the ability of women's funds to adapt, rise to new opportunities and remain responsive to movements – that could help to build the case for this type of funding?



Has participation in Fenomenal Funds contributed to change within the partners of the collaborative? What are we learning about trust, relationship building and accountability? And what does it take to resource these evolving practices?

Fenomenal Funds offers a different way for private foundations and the women's funds to be in relationship with each other. What are we learning about trust? Relationship building? Accountability? Co-creation and participatory processes? How have the spaces where there is an equal exercise of power (the Advisory Committee and Steering Committee) and associated collective sensemaking engendered new insights, and how have they informed the evolution of Fenomenal Funds? We are curious to foster spaces for ongoing reflection and distillation of learnings, including the space to reflect on how individuals have taken the Fenomenal Funds lessons into their day-to-day practices in the institutions they inhabit. What are the benefits of this approach? What are the conditions required to enable them? The challenges that arise from them and the insights we have learnt about how to manage them? And what are the resource costs of these approaches and how do we build the business case for them to be adopted? Are our lessons transferable into other sites? Are adjustments required, or are they directly applicable? Are there differences associated with the power dynamics that dominate in diverse contexts?



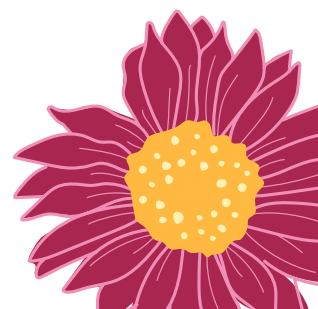


What will it take to shift our collective practices towards 'power with' rather than 'power over'?

Fenomenal Funds is on a journey. As a collaborative of women's funds and private foundations, our aspiration is to 'power with', but our broader cultural context is that of 'power over' and its reactionary pairing with 'power under'. As a result, we are going to have moments where the impact of our context drives 'power over'/'power under' dynamics. It is unreasonable to expect an immediate and perfect transformation. But our curiosity is around how we get better in terms of both recognising (in the moment or shortly after) instances of 'power over'/'power under' – and being able to name them in a constructive manner. How do we become more power literate – as both individuals and organizations? How do we create the language, tools and practices that enable both individual and organizational power literacy – particularly as we acknowledge the deep interconnection of power and individual ego, consciousness, and sense-of-self (which are not commonly addressed in a professional context)? And how do we then translate these insights to audiences and institutions who may not have spent as much time thinking about personal and organizational power as feminists tend to?

AND FINALLY, WE CARRY WITH US THE ONGOING INQUIRY INTO OUR OWN THEORY OF TRANSFORMATION.

Collaboratively, we have considered the stories women's funds have shared with us, to see if there are any signals that our model is delivering results for gender justice. We think it is too early to say. What we do know is that women's funds report that it has been affirming to be given funds that they can invest in their own sustainability, and that these funds have enabled them to, for example, strengthen their infrastructure, bring their attention to fundraising, invest in their staff and their individual and collective resilience. We are curious to further explore whether the experience of receiving funding in this way leads to change in women's funds' practices. And whether the shifts in their organizational infrastructure provides them with the resources (financial, human, material) to take bold steps to practice the principles they hold as central to their feminist identities.



JOIN US FOR WHAT COMES NEXT...

Fenomenal Funds is a bold experiment to create something new within the philanthropic landscape. More than just a set of ideas, it is a commitment to embracing the challenges of what it takes to create feminist futures within philanthropy.

At the heart of this bold experiment is a partnership between private foundations and women's funds: to reconceptualize the exercise of power and privilege between the actors. And to do so in service of the vision of getting more and better resources to gender justice movements by investing in the organizations – the women's funds – that channel resources to the movements at the margins.

We are profoundly grateful that the individuals and institutions who make up Fenomenal Funds, have fully embraced the opportunity and immersed themselves in the process of what this means and what it implies.

It is hard work. It is hard work because it calls on everyone at the table to leave their comfort zones and walk towards each other, and in the process let go of the story of 'us and them' in order to become 'we'. It is challenging all of us about what it means to negotiate the exercise of power in ways that are consistent with our core feminist values. It is also rewarding. Rewarding because the skills, knowledge, and wisdom that each brings is fundamental to the success of this initiative. Women's funds have a uniquely valuable perspective and position in the funding ecosystem and in relation to movements. Private foundations sit in a privileged position because of the resources they control – what they learn from this initiative has the potential to shift practices in the wider ecosystem, especially given the transitional moment we are in as a result of the ongoing global crises and understanding of the deep social change required in this moment.

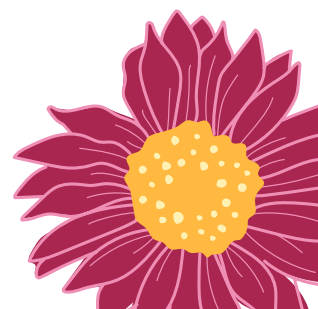
The story of the Resilience Grants – the decisions that informed the structure and approach – represents what is possible when this convergence is harmonious: when there is trust and focus on the shared goal; the collective goals supersede individual agendas; and the decision-making relies on consensus. In all of this, trust allows a letting go of "what should be" and opens up space for "what is possible".

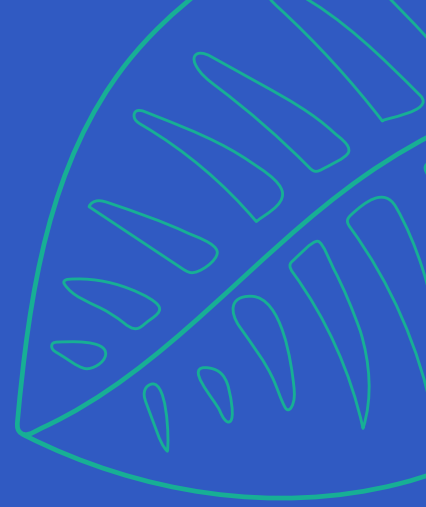
It is easier to take leaps into new ways of doing things when there is trust.

And in the case of the Resilience Grants – that all came together in the moment, perfectly.

We're excited about what we're learning and how we are growing from this experience. And we're excited about how it is influencing our grantmaking practices, in real time.

WE LOOK FORWARD TO SHARING MORE OF OUR INSIGHTS, NOT JUST ABOUT WHAT THIS FUNDING HAS MEANT TO WOMEN'S FUNDS, BUT WHAT IT TAKES TO DO THIS WORK. JOIN US AS WE DEEPEN THE CONVERSATIONS AND CONTINUE TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE FUNDER PRACTICES THAT UNLOCK MORE AND BETTER RESOURCES FOR GENDER JUSTICE MOVEMENTS.





www.fenomenalfunds.org

