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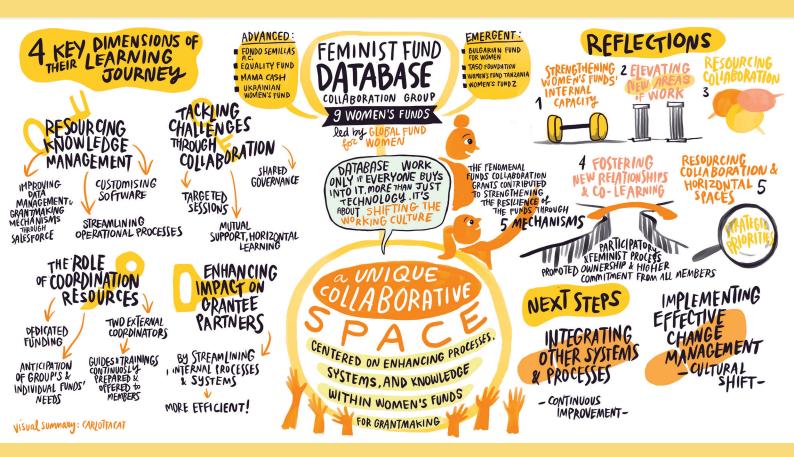
Investing in operational improvements and knowledge management: a feminist strategy

The Feminist Fund Database collaboration group

Feminist Fund Database

> **Case study focus**: Collaboration Grant

> **Number of participating women's funds**: Nine

> **Participating women's funds**:

>> *Emergent*: Bulgarian Fund for Women, Global Fund for Women, Taso Foundation, Women's Fund Tanzania, Women's Fund Z

>> *Advanced*: Fondo Semillas A.C, Global Fund for Women, Equality Fund, Mama Cash, Ukrainian Women's Fund

> **Geographical focus**: Global

> **Focus of the collaboration group**: Operational. This collaboration aims to provide technical and peer support for implementing Salesforce in grantmaking processes

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Executive summary

This case study highlights the transformative journey of nine women's funds who, through a Collaborative Grant initiative, significantly strengthened their individual and collective resilience. Together, they have invested in systems, processes, and knowledge management to establish effective feminist operational systems for grantmaking, while simultaneously unlocking the power of shared learning and mutual support.

The work of this collaboration group has crucially highlighted the importance of resourcing knowledge management. By fostering better decision-making through the implementation of information management systems, the nine funds have created more effective and responsive organizations.

As one Global Fund for Women interviewee noted,

"It is strategic for women's funds to take technology seriously, and to invest in systems that make our work more systematic and efficient."

Their actions have also allowed them to create stronger foundations through which to support their grantee partners.

However, the outcomes go beyond technical aspects—with their work challenging traditional hierarchical models of knowledge production and decision-making, and emphasizing collective action, shared power, and inclusivity. They have encouraged other feminist funds to rethink their approach to learning, measurement, and prioritization, in turn bridging gaps in resources and knowledge across diverse geographies, languages, and fund sizes.

Introduction

This case study explores the transformative journey of the Feminist Fund Database collaboration group during their engagement with Fenomenal Funds over the past three years. Comprising nine women's funds, this group formed a unique collaborative space focused on enhancing processes, systems, and knowledge management within women's funds. The Collaboration Grant provided by Fenomenal Funds supported them in building and strengthening their innovative initiative.

The case study begins by tracing the origins of the Feminist Fund Database collaboration group, highlighting the vision that brought these women's funds together. From there, it delves into four key dimensions of their learning journey:

1. **Resourcing knowledge management**: We examine the significance—and novelty—of investing in knowledge management systems and processes of women's funds;

2. **Tackling challenges through collaboration**: We analyze how the group addressed shared obstacles, leveraging its collective strength to explore solutions;

3. **The role of coordination resources**: We explore the value of resourcing coordination efforts that foster horizontal and inclusive collaboration among the women's funds;

4. **Enhancing impact on grantee partners**: Finally, we discuss how improved processes and systems have bolstered the ability of women's funds to create meaningful impacts for their grantee partners.

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We conclude with a reflection on how these elements align with the group's intended outcomes for the collaboration grants. The future plans of the Feminist Fund Database collaboration group are also explored, and these emphasize the importance of continued investment in knowledge management and systems strengthening as a critical step toward feminist futures.

The origins of the group

In 2018, a group of women's funds from Prospera International Network of Women's Funds, who were led by the Global Fund for Women (GFW), posed a crucial question:

> *"Can we work together to create a more systematic approach to supporting women's funds in improving their operational processes, including grantmaking, fundraising, and testing new database tools?"*

To begin addressing this, GFW adapted Salesforce's Nonprofit Success Pack (NPSP) for grantmaking, after which it was piloted with Prospera and four women's funds: Ukrainian Women's Fund, Fondo Semillas A.C., Reconstruction Women's Fund, and Women's Fund Tanzania. From there, "We frequently received requests from other women's funds to show them how we structure our database and use Salesforce for grantmaking," recalled one GFW staff member.

Without the resources to continue providing the necessary support, the Fenomenal Funds Collaboration Grant proved a lifeline to do so—and, this time, try to do it differently. The Feminist Fund Database collaboration group was formed, comprising nine women's funds (three of which participated in the GFW pilot). The participating funds were divided into two groups: advanced, which included those who already had functioning grantmaking databases, and emergent, which included those at the beginning of their database journey. While this distinction allowed for tailored learning sessions, ensuring that each fund's unique needs were met, the group's true strength lay in co-learning—tackling challenges together, and strengthening their collective knowledge and practices.

What is the Feminist Fund Database?

The Feminist Fund Database is an unmanaged package, according to Salesforce. An unmanaged package in Salesforce is open-source and is a collection of components that can be customized by the user after installation. It is not available on the Salesforce app exchange; instead, women's funds receive it directly from GFW.

The Feminist Fund Database supports grantmaking and fundraising processes (gifts are tracked using Salesforce's NPSP). In addition, the database provides a 'bridge' between processes for allocating incoming restricted funding to outgoing grants geographically or thematically, and for charging those grants back to particular pooled funds. By virtue of its deep customizability, the Feminist Fund Database can align with a women's fund's existing processes through the use of several built-in tools.

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Uses and effects of the Collaboration Grant

Resourcing knowledge management

Traditionally, funding for women's funds has been allocated to specific programmes or projects with set goals, leaving little room for investment in operational improvements such as knowledge management systems. However, the Collaboration Grant allowed the Feminist Fund Database collaboration group the space to focus on enhancing internal processes and systems.

Using the Collaboration Grant, the participating funds directed resources toward improving their data management, customizing software, and streamlining operational processes such as grantmaking and fundraising. This shift improved their ability to handle large volumes of data and enhanced their capacity to make strategic decisions. **"Learning is about generating new information that will change the way we operate,"** noted one fund member.

To implement these changes, each fund had to develop a clear understanding of its existing data systems and define its strategic objectives for how it wanted to use data. The process varied depending on each fund's level of data maturity, the type of information it managed, and its vision for knowledge management. For example, one fund used the opportunity to overhaul its entire grantmaking process, revising its due diligence procedures and application system. Meanwhile, another focused on improving its review interface for assessing grant applications to facilitate an easier and more transparent evaluation, with the help of consultants.

Across the board, these efforts led to stronger daily operations, improved practices, and better preservation of institutional knowledge—ensuring that the funds were not only more efficient, but also better equipped to achieve their goals with precision and clarity.

Tackling challenges through collaboration and co-learning

The Feminist Fund Database collaboration group proved to be an invaluable space for the nine women's funds to tackle shared operational challenges. Historically, many women's funds attempted to address their issues in isolation, often relying on external experts who do not fully understand their unique needs and feminist values. However, the collaboration group changed this dynamic by fostering a non-competitive, collective, problem-solving environment. The funds were able to share their experiences, learn from each other's successes and mistakes, and co-create tailored solutions to address their specific needs.

Despite being split into two groups according to the stage of their operational journey, the funds were still able to bridge gaps and exchange knowledge.

Through targeted learning sessions, advanced funds shared their expertise with those newer to the process, while the emergent funds offered fresh perspectives that challenged assumptions and sparked innovation.

This mutual support created a sense of solidarity among the participants. As one group member noted, "Being in an atmosphere where we realized that other funds have the same questions and face the same issues was definitely beneficial."

The nature of the collaboration group affords **no room for power dynamics**, even though some of the larger funds are funding partners of some of the smaller ones—and this **equitable approach defies the competitive dynamics** often seen in philanthropic circles. All participants contribute and learn from each other. The group engages in shared decision-making, rooted in feminist principles of participatory governance, and collectively determined how to allocate the grant, balancing

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individual priorities with the collective needs of the group. More advanced funds even consciously chose to request less funding to support the smaller, emerging funds. As one participant reflected, this collaborative environment is "all about learning from each other."

In a sector where women's funds often face competition for limited resources, the approach of shared learning and mutual resource allocation exemplifies powerful feminist solidarity. A significant outcome of the collaboration is **the strengthening of trust and long-term relationships between the women's funds**—particularly among staff responsible for systems and processes, who do not typically have opportunities to meet at networking events—and these bonds will continue long into the future.

Resourcing coordination and facilitating needs

Crucially, the Collaboration Grant provided the Feminist Fund Database collaboration group with dedicated financial resources to cover the salaries of two external coordinators, whose roles are vital in facilitating the group's work. With the help of these coordinators, a connection is maintained between the two sub-groups and the women's funds can focus on strategic initiatives rather than logistical demands.

The coordinators were essential in relieving the burden of managing and organizing the group, which was particularly important given the already heavy workloads of the participating funds.

By anticipating the group's needs, designing and facilitating the community of practice, and creating knowledge products aligned to individual funds' goals and the group's collective objectives, the coordinators ensure the collaboration remains enthusiastic and productive.

For example, the coordinators determined individual learning needs and scheduled specific meetings to discuss these, and also shared prompt questions that guided how the group would address a certain topic. Without this dedicated support, administrative tasks and competing priorities could have easily overwhelmed the group's efforts.

Better processes for greater outcomes

Improving internal systems and processes within women's funds has proven transformative for both the funds and their grantee partners. Streamlining systems has made it easier to manage growing volumes of information, and has significantly improved how funds allocate resources and respond to the needs of their partners.

The collaboration group's focus on optimizing processes allowed funds to move away from outdated and labour-intensive tools, which were increasingly unmanageable as grantmaking volume grew.

For instance, one fund shared that managing 20 grants per year in Excel was feasible, but when the number rose to 50 or more, it became untenable. Transitioning to more efficient systems allowed it to process applications more quickly and accurately, saving significant time and resources.

Meanwhile, another fund member explained that more streamlined processes make it easier for partners to log into websites, create accounts, and submit proposals. For the fund's staff, using an integrated system means applications can be reviewed, assigned, and responded to more efficiently—reducing the administrative workload, enhancing transparency, and improving communication with partners. One member of the collaboration group stated that **the new system has led to "a big improvement in the quality of life" for both staff and grantees**.

By freeing up resources previously tied to administrative tasks, women's funds can invest more in strategic activities, such as fundraising and increased partner support and engagement.

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Conclusions

The experience of the Feminist Fund Database collaboration group shows how the Fenomenal Funds' Collaboration Grant contributed to strengthening the resilience of women's funds through the following mechanisms:

> **Strengthened women's funds internal capacity** by improving their systems and access to reliable information, which ultimately enhances women's funds' responsiveness to the needs of their grantee partners and the gender justice movement;

> **Elevated new areas of work**, such as systems, processes, and knowledge management, which are often overlooked in traditional funding;

> **Championed collaboration** and supported women's funds to collectively address shared challenges, reducing dependence on external experts or tools;

> **Fostered new relationships and co-learning**, to bridge resource and knowledge gaps between diverse women's funds, put into practice feminist and decolonial learning practices, and promote solidarity and shared decision-making;

> **Aided resourcing coordination**, allowing the women's funds to focus on strategic priorities without the additional burden of facilitating the group's coordination.

These elements collectively fortified the resilience of the women's funds, both individually and as a network, enabling them to adapt to challenges, seize new opportunities, and sustain their critical role in the feminist funding ecosystem.

What's next for the Feminist Fund Database collaboration group?

For the Feminist Fund Database collaboration group, the journey of strengthening processes, systems, and knowledge management is ongoing—and, moving forward in their journey together, they aim to address two key priorities:

1. **Integrating other systems and processes**: Some members felt that broader operational discussions across the ecosystem are needed to further enhance processes and improve communication and integration across all organizational functions. Future funding should be used to address these gaps. As women's funds evolve, their processes and systems needs also adapt—and the group's ambition is to continue improving their systems with the ever-evolving feminist and technological ecosystem. The group also plans to integrate other processes, such as procurement, finance, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning, to support well-connected teams and systems.

2. **Implementing effective change management**: The group recognizes that transforming how information is produced and used requires a cultural shift. Engaging their staff early and dedicating resources to building trust and acceptance of new systems will be critical to their future success.

Collaboration remains a cornerstone of the group's approach. **The relationships and trust built between the participating funds have created a strong foundation for continued mutual learning and shared action**. To sustain this momentum, securing future funding will be essential, as few spaces currently exist for women's funds to collectively address operational and process-related challenges. The group is committed to maintaining these collaborative spaces and continuing to champion knowledge management as a priority for feminist futures.

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