

FUNDING SOCIAL JUSTICE FUTURES:

STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE POWER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In an increasingly complex world, collaboration has emerged as a vital tool for driving resilience and impact in social justice work. However, the power of collaboration is often untapped, particularly in strengthening organizational infrastructure. This report from Fenomenal Funds, a feminist funder collaborative, presents compelling evidence for the transformative potential of investing in collaborative organizational infrastructure initiatives for these challenging times

Fenomenal Funds is a five-year experiment that uses a shared governance model and participatory grantmaking through pooled funding. Over the last five years, we have been able to move over USD 20 million to support 47 women's funds working in the Majority World to support organizational resilience. In 2022, Fenomenal Funds invested USD 6.6 million over two years to support organizational infrastructure collaborations among women's funds, members of the Prospera International Network of Women's Funds. Recognizing women's funds as crucial intermediaries in mobilizing resources for grassroots gender justice movements, this investment aimed to enhance their resilience and strategic capacity. The underlying assumption based on our Theory of Transformation¹ was that women's funds would go further if they were acting together.



¹ Read the Fenomenal Funds Theory of Transformation: https://fenomenalfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Fenomenal-Funds-Theory-of-Transformation_spreads.pdf

The Collaboration Labs, designed by the Fenomenal Funds Advisory Committee, facilitated meaningful collaborations among women's funds through a three-phase, non-competitive process. The 15 Collaboration Initiatives, clustered around four thematic areas—organizational systems and practices, grantmaking innovation, organizational financial resilience, and narrative change—achieved remarkable outcomes:

- All 15 initiatives applied their learnings to at least one concrete action.
- Eleven of the 15 initiatives reported an increased sense of solidarity.
- All 15 initiatives built a peer support network.
- Seven initiatives helped small funds strengthen technical skills.

Clear evidence and concrete examples show that these initiatives have resulted in:

Strengthened organizational resilience:

Collaborations leveraged peer knowledge and diverse contexts to develop robust organizational tools and approaches. The structured, resourced process enabled the prioritization of infrastructure work. Fourteen of the 15 initiatives stated that bringing together groups of women's funds across geographies, languages, scopes, and scales was indeed a transformative learning experience, which supported organizational infrastructure strengthening and validated the approach.

Enhanced capacity to serve movements:

Initiatives produced practical tools to improve internal operations and partnerships, boosting staff confidence and the capacity to mobilize resources. Women's funds reported that improved organizational practices freed up resources for strategy, planning, and partner relationships, enabling better identification and funding of emerging grassroots gender justice issues. Twelve of the 15 initiatives reported that they were **better able to serve the needs of their movement partners**.

Stronger relationships across the feminist funding ecosystem:

Collaborations deepened trust and understanding across contexts, shaping the strategic evolution of feminist work. Anecdotal evidence from Learning Conversations suggested similar benefits for women's funds' partners, including strengthened capacity in monitoring, evaluation, learning, resource mobilization, and more open, reflective relationships with communities. All initiatives stated that the collaborations provided a rare and much-needed space for explorations, experimentation, collective reflection, shared knowledge generation, and learning.

Backed by evidence generated from our Learning Conversations, we can clearly state that the Collaboration Initiatives have **transformed funds' systems, policies, and practices with and for the movements they support**, validating our hypothesis that resourcing women's funds in this particular way **can strengthen their resilience and strategic capacity to serve movements through collaboration**.

By supporting these funds, we are not just investing in organizations; we are investing in the collective power of movements and communities working for justice and equality. Women's funds make an important contribution to bridging resources, responding to emergent issues, and supporting the incredible efforts of activists, organizations, and networks on the ground. This is a testament to what is possible when trust-based funding aligns with bold visions for change.

While the insights from this report are grounded in the experiences of women's funds and gender justice movements, they have significant relevance for funders supporting a wide range of social justice causes. Fenomenal Funds' experience underscores the value of intermediary funds in bridging gaps between private philanthropy and grassroots movements and the transformative potential of investing in collaborative organizational infrastructure.



The report offers three sets of recommendations for funders interested in investing in collaborations among intermediary funds and similar organizations that support social justice systems change work:

Five critical mindset shifts to leverage the power of collaboration:



1

Embrace pooled, flexible, non-competitive funding as a driver of results.

2

Recognize multiyear funding as necessary for spaciousness and stronger outcomes.

3

Invest in process and co-learning to maximize collaboration impact.

4

Reconceptualize process as an input, output, and outcome of collaboration.

5

Understand self-direction as the key to better collaborations.

Six practical tips for funders investing in collaboration:



1

Stretch yourself in determining the suitability of your funding for this approach.

2

Fully and flexibly fund both the processes and activities of collaboration.

3

Consciously engage with the power dynamics involved in the collaboration.

4

Embrace the opportunity for unlearning and shifting away from harmful funding practices.

5

Embed responsiveness and flexibility into your relationships with movement partners.

6

Embrace a continuous cycle of participatory and collaborative learning.

Ten practices to drive effective collaboration:



- 1 Be intentional about collaboration.
- 2 Invest in relationship building.

- 3 Articulate shared objectives.
- 4 Build power literacy.
- 5 Collectivize knowledge and risks.
- 6 Embrace flexibility and plurality.
- 7 Navigate clarity and complexity.
- 8 Challenge assumptions.
- 9 Leverage the power of reflection.
- 10 Enable equitable participation.

To complement the report and support funders in applying these insights, Fenomenal Funds has developed a toolkit with practical resources, such as reflection questions, case studies, and templates for designing and facilitating collaborative labs. Additionally, a dedicated microsite serves as a one-stop platform to explore the report's findings, access the toolkit, learn about the collaborative groups, and gain insights into the thematic areas these groups address.

At its core, this report, along with the accompanying toolkit and microsite, is an invitation to reimagine the way we support feminist movements and gender justice work. It calls on funders to recognize the transformative potential of feminist collaboration—an approach grounded in diversity, power consciousness, practicality, and flexible, long-term resourcing. The evidence is clear: By investing in collaboration and the critical infrastructure of women's funds, we can unlock the collective power of the feminist funding ecosystem to drive resilience and impact in the face of urgent global challenges.

3 Find the Fenomenal Funds Collaboration Grants Toolkit here: <https://fenomenalfunds.org/grantmaking/collaboration-grants/tools-resources>

4 Visit the microsite here: <https://fenomenalfunds.org/grantmaking/collaboration-grants/>

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