



Strengthening Feminist Futures

Through multi-year, core, and flexible
funding partnerships with women's funds

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Colophon

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or positions of the organizations involved.

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Introduction

Feminist movements around the world comprise diverse actors and stakeholders, ranging from global organizations to local grassroots groups. Within this vibrant ecosystem, women's funds play a crucial role as feminist philanthropic organizations. Different from women's organizations, the primary purpose of women's funds is to mobilize resources rather than providing direct services and programmes. Women's funds have a long track record of knowing where and how to engage with and support organizations working to achieve gender justice in their communities, countries, and regions. Today, they are reaching women's rights movements in some of the most challenging contexts and are at

the leading edge of the most pressing human rights issues. These organizations work with those most vulnerable, such as widows, LGBTQI+ groups, and indigenous communities. This report, backed by 10 case studies, aims to demonstrate the power (and track record) of partnering with women's funds to continue building feminist futures. Through these, we hope to give justice to and exemplify the results that can arise from multi-year, sustained, core, and flexible support. We also hope to inspire the reader to reflect on their existing experience and knowledge of funding models, and how it could be inspired by Fenomenal Funds.

Fenomenal Funds



[Fenomenal Funds](#) is a feminist funding collaborative that challenges traditional philanthropic models by adopting a feminist, participatory approach to grantmaking. **Unlike conventional top-down funding**, where donors often control the process, Fenomenal Funds utilizes **shared governance and equal decision-making power** among its stakeholders, including private foundations and women's funds. This model shifts power dynamics, allowing women's funds that are part of the [Prospera International Network of Women's Funds \(INWF\)](#) to influence strategies and resource allocation, **fostering a more resilient and equitable feminist funding ecosystem**.



The collaborative is supported by four funding partners—[Foundation for a Just Society](#), [Open Society Foundations](#), [The Hewlett Foundation](#), and [Wellspring Philanthropic Fund](#)—through a **pooled fund**. In 2020, Fenomenal Funds embarked on a journey to support the resilience of the nearly **50 women's funds** (which are **members of the Prospera INWF**) who focus on achieving four outcomes, namely:

- Women's funds have the resources, systems, and practices to respond to the needs of gender justice movements;

- Women's funds deepen connection and collaboration to co-create strategies that will sustain a resilient feminist funding ecosystem;
- Women's funds use their collective voice to influence the agenda and flow of resources to gender justice movements;
- Leveraging their model to influence philanthropy to shift power and resources to gender justice movements.

To support these outcomes, Fenomenal Funds developed two types of grants: the [Resilience Grant](#) and the [Collaboration Grant](#); both non-competitive, flexible, and based on core funding principles.

In the case studies, we zoom in on the first two outcomes, investigating and conveying the experiences of the women's funds' collaborations with Fenomenal Funds and the support of the Resilience and Collaboration Grants.

THE RESILIENCE GRANT

Unlike traditional grants to women's funds, which are primarily used for regranting to partners, the **Resilience Grant** is a multi-year, fixed-amount, non-competitive grant focused exclusively on **the organizational development and strengthening of women's funds**. The recipient funds could tailor the grant to their specific contexts and needs, and we have seen examples of the grant being used for enhancing resource mobilization, improving communications, upgrading workspaces, and implementing new technologies, to name a few.

By investing in the organizational strengthening of women's funds, Fenomenal Funds aspired to cultivate a more resilient and responsive esourcing network that can better serve grassroots feminist movements, not least in times of turbulence. A total of USD 12.75 million was allocated for this grant and, through the shared governance structure, it was decided that all the women's fund members of the Prospera INWF participating in the Fenomenal Funds initiative would receive a portion of this funding.

THE COLLABORATION GRANT

Meanwhile, the **Collaboration Grant** aimed to support the deepening of connections and collaborations between women's funds, so they could co-create strategies to sustain a resilient feminist funding ecosystem. Like the Resilience Grant, the Collaboration Grant was non-competitive. It was distributed to 15 collaboration groups among women's funds, ranging from between two to 19 funds working together for 18 to 24 months. A total of USD 6.7 million was allocated for this grant, with grant amounts varying from USD 230,000 to USD 530,000 per collaboration, based on the scope and scale of the joint initiative. The funding was used to foster and support the set up, initiation, and outcomes of collaborations between Prospera INWF members.

Guiding question and criteria for the case studies

In 2023, we—a team of four advisors at the **KIT Institute** in the Netherlands—were selected to accompany Fenomenal Funds in the co-creation and implementation of a **Learning Plan** during the final 20 months of their five-year implementation process. The aim of the Learning Plan has been to look back at the experience and identify

key learnings that help answer Fenomenal Funds' question:

What will it take to strengthen the individual infrastructure and collective ecosystem of women's fund members of the Prospera INWF?

To begin answering this, a decision was made to conduct **10 case studies**: six focusing on women’s funds’ experiences with the Resilience Grant, and four diving into the experiences of collaboration groups funded through the Collaboration Grant. To be able to put forward the most **diverse** and **representative cases**, an open call was made, inviting all Prospera INWF members to flag their interest in participating. Prospera’s members include 47 women’s funds, spanning all continents and regions, working at local, national, regional, and global levels. Some of them have been around for decades, while others have been able to formalize their operations more recently through the support

of Fenomenal Funds. Priority was also given to women’s funds with otherwise limited visibility, ensuring a mix of perspectives and experiences in the feminist funding ecosystem.

For the Collaboration Grant, in addition to the aforementioned **criteria**, diversity within the groups and the thematic area of the collaboration were important factors for selection. These criteria, as illustrated in the graph below, reflect and are guided by Fenomenal Funds’ [Theory of Transformation](#), to attempt to **give justice to the diversity of the membership of Prospera INWF** and its members’ experience with the Fenomenal Funds collaborative.



A closer look at the case studies

With this series of case studies, we share how Fenomenal Funds’ funding model supported the resilience of and collaborations between the women’s funds. Each case provides different insights in to how multi-year, flexible funding impacts organizations of different regions, sizes, and durations. Since all women’s funds received the Resilient Grant, and the vast majority were also a part of collaboration groups, you might find that references are made to both across the cases. However, we hope that each of the case studies in their own way will guide and inspire funders who are looking for long-term resilient partners with whom to **build feminist futures around the world**.

The six case studies focused on the Resilience Grant will introduce you to:

- › The emergent/emerging **Doria Feminist Fund**, who—with the help of the Resilience Grant—contributes to bridging the feminist funding gap in South West Asia and North Africa, a region with multiple crises;
- › **Fondo de Mujeres del Sur**, who used the grant to set itself up to better respond to unforeseen circumstances and the upcoming needs of its partners, in times of COVID-19 and political uncertainty;
- › **Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises**, who—with the help of the grant—responded to the barriers of its insecure context while also increasing the outcomes and visibility of its work, better supporting its grantee partners;
- › **Mama Cash**, one of the oldest and largest women’s funds in the world, who used the grant to strengthen internal processes, including fundraising and communications, showing that even well-established funds benefit from this type of support;
- › The **Taso Foundation**, which effectively used the Resilience Grant to support resilience-building in an increasingly unfriendly political environment;
- › “**Womens Fund X**”, which has seen itself develop from a small fledgling community foundation to one that is increasingly confident and sustainable with the support of the Resilience Grant.

Through the four Collaboration Grant case studies you will learn about:

- › How the **Feminist Financial Resilience** group harnessed the opportunity for transformational institutional strengthening by means of learning about and implementing a holistic financial approach;
- › How the funds participating in the **Feminist Healing Spaces** group were given space to apply healing as a holistic and systemic practice rooted in feminist values, essential for the resilience of their funds and for feminist movements globally;
- › How the eight members of the **Alliance of Women’s and Feminist Funds of Latin America and the Caribbean** group use the power of collaborative narratives to support the gender justice movement, especially in times of increasing political repression;
- › How the 10 women’s funds in the **Feminist Fund Databases** group made grantmaking more effective and efficient through better integration of digital infrastructure, while simultaneously fostering collective learning, bridging gaps, and enhancing their responsiveness to feminist movements.

While each of these cases has a particular story, by looking at them in relation to each other, we aim to offer a kaleidoscope of learning on how the Fenomenal Funds model contributed to strengthening the individual infrastructure and collective ecosystem of women’s funds.

Core concepts

To respond to the guiding questions from the Fenomenal Funds' Theory of Transformation and the KIT Learning Plan, the following framing was used:

Collaboration

Collaborations strengthen funds externally through partnerships, and internally through knowledge sharing. They contribute to learning and solidarity between women's funds.

Decolonial

A decolonial perspective recognizes the historical power dynamics that have subalternized the peoples, cultures, and knowledges of the Global South, and privileged those of the Global North. It invites us to reflect critically on our own positionality within those dynamics and how we can contribute to their transformation.

Disruptions

Disruptions can be positive or negative, external or internal changes that happen to women's funds. Organizational shifts are a type of disruption that can test the resilience of a women's fund. These shifts can be around internal processes, leadership transitions, and a changing of power dynamics.

Feminist funding

Feminist funding is flexible, rights-based, and guided by feminist principles and platforms' movements and funders together, with a respect for experience sharing. The flexibility of the funding contributes to resilience by creating room for women's funds to set their own agenda and adapt during disruptive times.

Feminist learning

Feminist learning promotes shared decision-making and prioritizes knowledge generation, while meaningfully recognizing existing power dynamics and attempting to shift them through co-creation processes and collective learning.

Healing

Feminist activism is invisibilized and under-resourced. "To sustain movements, it is critical to sustain the health and wellbeing of activists." Healing plays a key role in guaranteeing resilience by strengthening the wellbeing of those working in the ecosystem.

Collective findings

With the help of data collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and collective analysis with the diverse stakeholders included in and constituting the Fenomenal Funds collaborative, we have recognized **seven key findings across the 10 case studies**. These will be further elaborated on and more deeply analyzed in the **Final Report planned for May 2025**, but here, we share an overview and introduce the core concepts of our approach.

The case studies seek to answer a key question from Fenomenal Funds' Theory of Transformation:

Did the Resilience and Collaboration Grants contribute to strengthening the resilience of the women's funds? If so, how?

To respond to this, we analyzed the findings of the case studies with regards to the intended two first outcomes of the Fenomenal Funds model:

1. Women's funds have the resources, systems, and practices to respond to the needs of gender justice movements.
2. Women's funds deepen their connections and collaborations to co-create strategies that will sustain a resilient feminist funding ecosystem.

Resilience is understood as the ability of the women's funds to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, seize new opportunities, stay responsive to their partners, and effectively address disruptions—whether positive or negative, internal or external. Across the 10 case studies, we identified common ways in which the two grants contributed to this:

1. Internal capacity strengthening

The Resilience Grant enabled the women's funds to invest in their financial strengthening capacities through the creation of financial reserves, financial policies, and an emergency funding mechanism.

They have also been able to invest in internal systems and processes, as well as in their staff, through the guarantee of salaries and new training opportunities on key competencies.

2. Improved governance and strategies

As a fund grows, so does the need for internal structures. The women's funds shared that they used the Resilience Grant to work on governance, resource mobilization, and communication, along with developing overall strategies, supporting leadership transitions, and organizing strategy meetings with their partners.

3. Enhancing a culture of care

The women's funds allocated part of their Resilience Grant to work on establishing or reinforcing a culture of collective care in their organizations, through trainings, technology, and the provision of health insurance.

4. Resourced collaboration

The Collaboration Grant enabled the collaboration groups to have a more creative space for collaboration. It also allowed the groups to hire external facilitators, afforded flexibility and support for the set-up and implementation of the collaborations, and helped group members create a non-transactional space for learning.

5. Elevating new areas of work

The Collaboration Grant provided an opportunity for the women's funds to focus on un(der) developed areas of work that are all indirectly connected to their ability to support feminist movements. This included topics such as building networks to support democracy and human rights across continents, collective learning and resource mobilization, feminist organizational development, and collective learning on participatory grantmaking.

6. New relationships and learnings

Through the Collaboration Grant and groups, the women's funds connected with sister funds in novel ways. These associations allowed them to see the similar challenges they face, to learn and approach new areas of work together, and to collaborate in mutually beneficial ways.

7. Better response to grantee partners

Together, these six outcomes have had a catalytic effect on the women's funds as feminist philanthropic organizations, extending to their support for their grantee partners—organizations working to achieve gender justice across the world. This particularly comes out in terms of grantmaking, relationship and trust-building, sharing new learnings, and collective care measures.

In sum, through the multi-year, core, and flexible funding received by collaborating with Fenomenal

Funds, the women's funds have had the resources to develop:

- Strategies that enhance their work;
- Policies that prioritize their members' wellbeing;
- Investments in transitions that make them structurally strong(er);
- Reinforcements to their internal capacities;
- New and strengthened relationships within the feminist ecosystem.

These interventions have allowed the funds to enhance their ability to effectively respond to disruptions and sharpened their capacity to adapt to unforeseen circumstances—making them invaluable partners for anyone aiming to reach those being most marginalized in the pursuit of feminist futures.

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