



WOMENSTRONG  
INTERNATIONAL

## WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

### Reflections on Year One of WomenStrong's Learning Lab

WomenStrong finds, funds, strengthens, and shares women-driven solutions that can improve the lives of women and girls in the areas of education, violence, and women's health. In the fall of 2020, WomenStrong completed the first year of implementing our new Learning Lab model and conducted an evaluation to understand the experiences of our first cohorts of grantee partners. This brief shares our findings related to Learning Lab activities and outlines how we will use those findings and feedback from partners to improve our approach.

### The Learning Lab Model

WomenStrong's partner support model goes beyond grantmaking. The women-led, locally-based organizations funded by WomenStrong receive grants to implement programs and are part of the WomenStrong Learning Lab. Partners implement programs in four areas of learning identified by WomenStrong as essential to improving the lives of women and girls living in urban and peri-urban areas: [Girls' Education and Empowerment](#), [Women's Health](#), and [Violence Against Women and Girls](#), and [Economic Security and Opportunity](#) (*pending*). The Learning Lab provides a space for these organizations to share lessons learned, challenges, successes, and tools, as well as access to capacity-strengthening that they have identified as beneficial to their work. The Lab also encourages and cultivates an exchange of ideas and community-building through an online portal of tools and resources, WhatsApp groups, web-based group discussions and knowledge-sharing, partner retreats, site visits and bilateral exchanges, and the joint development of tools.

In summer 2019, WomenStrong launched our Learning Lab with six partners working in the area of girls' education and empowerment. Twelve additional partners, whose work focused on women's health and the prevention of violence against women and girls, were funded in early spring of 2020, with many needing to shift their program activities due to COVID-19.



During the first year of the Lab, we held webinars covering topics as varied as promoting gender equality through education, remote programming during COVID-19, and self- and collective care, and provided or linked partners to technical assistance, such as providing them with support to develop program logic models or effective communications strategies, and discussing how to engage men and boys to advance gender equality.

## The Evaluation

WomenStrong is focused not only on providing a space for learning, sharing, and community-building among partners, but also on internal learning to achieve our objectives. This continuous learning includes regular assessments of our own individual activities, such as webinars and discussions, as well as more in-depth evaluations, to get feedback from our partners about how we are doing and what we can do to improve.

To understand the experience of our grantee partners, WomenStrong hired external consultants to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews among all 18 Learning Lab partners. These interviews occurred in September-October of 2020, using Zoom. We determined that it was important to use this qualitative method because we wanted to hear from partners, in their own words, about their experiences with WomenStrong. In addition to the interviews, the WomenStrong Knowledge and Learning team and the consultants facilitated two preliminary findings workshops with the partners, to clarify and gain additional insight into some of the evaluation findings. We then coded and analyzed the interviews and identified key findings with input from the external consultants.

## What We Learned

### What are partners getting out of the Lab?

In the evaluation interviews, more than half of the partners shared that they had applied something they learned from the Lab, often specifying that information and ideas shared by other partners in

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*We learned an idea [in a Lab discussion], that they [a partner] are talking with girls over the phone over the psychological trauma. They are providing counseling...and we used that idea to say that we wanted to be providing counseling support and support via phone to girls who are able, who are going through stress. And we were able to get some money [to support that work].*

– Partner, Girls' Education and Empowerment Lab cohort

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*I would say the benefit would be learning from different organizations. Definitely. And it could teach you how to adapt your activities. We perhaps think of implementing activities one way, and somebody else could see it in a totally different way. So, being able to learn and share and get some ideas from different organizations who are in the same boat, women's rights organizations, is a great thing.*

– Partner, Violence Against Women and Girls Lab cohort

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the Lab helped them adapt their programming in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and even secure additional funding.

Partners also shared that they used what they learned in the Lab to make changes in how they work internally. For example, in response to the increased need for self-care due to the pandemic, WomenStrong facilitated discussions about different strategies that organizations could try to address the stress experienced by their staff, which partners then shared with staff.

While about half our partners had applied something they learned in the Lab to their work, nearly all partners shared that they had gained knowledge or skills as a result of participating in the Lab. Technical and program-related knowledge were seen as most valuable. In particular, partners learned new approaches to project implementation from each other, and the benefits of learning from organizations working in different countries or regions.



### What is needed to build a community among organizations across countries and contexts?

WomenStrong has identified community-building as an important component in our Learning Lab model. We believe that fostering community between our grantee partners will enable them to forge the connections, trust, and aligned purpose needed to fully engage in peer-to-peer learning and collaboration beyond what WomenStrong facilitates. In addition, because we had previously worked for four years to connect our founding grantee partners across five countries, we also understood the challenges of building a community across timezones, and have sought out lessons learned from other organizations that have led and participated in learning communities to develop our own community-building strategies.

In the evaluation interviews, we sought to understand partners' experiences with each other in the Lab, whether they had formed relationships, and if not, what they felt were the barriers or facilitators to doing so.

Unsurprisingly, we found that being able to spend time together, in person, is a catalyst for building community. The Girls' Empowerment and Education partners, who had been in the Lab for one full year when interviewed, were able to spend a week together at an in-person retreat in November 2019. Over the course of five days, these partners took part in workshop discussions about different topics and had unprogrammed time when they were able to get to know each other. The retreat activities were intentionally designed to encourage partners to get to know one another and to understand their shared values. From the interviews, this time together was a significant catalyst for developing relationships and connections among this group.

This experience differed greatly from that of the 12 other partners, which joined the Lab in March 2020, and whose in-person retreat was postponed due to the pandemic. Zoom then became the sole way for WomenStrong staff and partners to connect in real time, where optional all-Lab webinars were hosted, some with explicit time for introductions and sharing challenges, others focused on discussing technical content. The WomenStrong portal, an online space for partners to share, provided a second space where partners could connect with each other, especially those on different sides of the world (e.g., in Cambodia and Mexico) whose staff were not able were less able to participate in the same Zoom calls.

Despite these efforts to foster connection virtually, both the original six partners and the newer 12 partners expressed challenges in making these connections, although they desired to do so. This was not unexpected, given that while we brought partners together, due to the pandemic, many activities were less focused on community-building and more focused on self-care and responding to the crisis in their communities. Further, during individual calls with WomenStrong early on in the pandemic, many partners shared that they had little bandwidth for anything beyond balancing their work and personal lives. The 12 newer partners often expressed that they did not know each other or each others' programs on a deep enough level to identify synergies or areas to collaborate. Even the partners who had met in person and had spent a full year in their Lab shared that the larger group activities meant less time for sharing and getting to know one another. Finally, we heard from partners that personal bandwidth, time zones, language and, of course, the format (Zoom), made making these connections more challenging.

## Applying What We Learned: What Now?

The evaluation interviews provided WomenStrong with rich information that helped us interrogate our approach and values as we moved into the second year of implementing the Learning Lab. In addition to finding that we are on track in some ways – for example, that the partners have gained knowledge and skills and, in many cases, have applied what they have learned to their internal functions and to their programs – we also learned that while the Lab may have the potential to be a supportive community of locally based women-led organizations that share and learn together, more effort and dedicated activities are required to make this happen.

We are working to adjust our program activities to prioritize peer-to-peer collaboration and community-building, and to ensure that we use creative approaches to engage partners while we are still unable to be together in person. We will implement some “easy wins” that were identified by partners during the evaluation and explored more during the findings workshops. For example, partners want more time for discussion during technical webinars, and for calls to have fewer participants, so that they can get to know each other better. We also heard that time zones continue to be a challenge, but that partners also greatly value hearing from others in different contexts. With this in mind, we are both providing multiple webinars to accommodate different time zones, and we are leveraging our portal as a tool for allowing discussions to continue across geographies. We heard from partners that while we are still living in a pandemic, much has been learned about how to safely implement their programs, and they want to have discussions about programmatic strategies (rather than further sessions focused on how to respond to Covid-19 in their communities, or on topics such as self-care).



We are also revising our approach to technical assistance. We heard in the evaluation that exchanges among partners and between WomenStrong and partners led to improved knowledge, skills, and in some cases, changed practices. Internally, however, we recognized a need to think more equitably about our approach to technical assistance, so as to give partners greater flexibility in having their needs met. Under our new approach, partners now have access to separate funds, in addition to their grants, that can be used to hire a local consultant, to attend a training or workshop, or in other ways that they feel will help them better meet their objectives.

We are excited to continue to keep learning at the center of what we do by responding to the important feedback of our partners and by examining our approach to peer learning and community-building.

This technical brief was authored by Amy Gregowski, Director of Research, WomenStrong International, with support from colleagues: Mara Steinhaus, Senior Research and Learning Specialist, and Dr. Chisina Kapungu, Director of Learning and Organizational Strengthening.

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*All photos are from the Girls' Education and Empowerment Learning Lab cohort in-person retreat held in November 2019.*