



**WOMENSTRONG**  
INTERNATIONAL

## WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

### WomenStrong's Grantmaking Model

WomenStrong International finds, funds, strengthens, and shares women-driven solutions that can improve the lives of women and girls in the areas of education, violence prevention, and women's health. This learning brief summarizes evaluation results from our current grantee partners about WomenStrong's approach to grantmaking, which has evolved over the past year to become more trust-based and flexible. A separate brief shares our findings related to our Learning Lab and outlines how we are using those findings to improve our approach.

### Evaluating WomenStrong's Grantmaking

WomenStrong has invested over \$15 million in strengthening the work of community-based, women-driven organizations worldwide since 2015. We adjusted our grantmaking and peer-learning model in summer 2019 by launching a new Learning Lab, to build a community of grantee partners who could engage with WomenStrong and each other to advance four areas of learning that WomenStrong has identified as essential to the vitality and empowerment of women and girls: [Girls' Education and Empowerment](#), [Women's Health](#), [Violence Against Women and Girls](#), and (to come in 2022) [Economic Security and Opportunity](#).



Photo: Rwanda Women's Network

The first Learning Lab cohort included six grantee partners that work in the area of girls' education and empowerment. Twelve more partners, whose work focused on women's health and the prevention of violence against women and girls, were brought together into two additional cohorts in the early spring of 2020.

WomenStrong conducted an evaluation in the fall of 2020 to understand the experiences of these cohorts. In particular, we wanted to learn how our Learning Lab had helped facilitate learning among our partner organizations, how it could provide these organizations with the resources and support they need to become stronger, and if and how our grantmaking practices have helped build and strengthen the relationships between WomenStrong and its partners, which are so vital to the success of the Learning Lab. This brief shares findings related to our grantmaking.



Photo: Projet Jeune Leader, Madagascar

## What Sets WomenStrong Apart?

### Personal and intentional recruitment

According to the first cohorts of partners whose projects have been funded under our new Learning Lab model, one difference that sets WomenStrong apart from their other funders is the personalized nature of our recruitment process.

WomenStrong does not accept unsolicited proposals, but instead extensively researches potential partners prior to making initial contact. Once we have established “fit” with our mission, we contact each organization to determine their interest in applying for a grant and being part of the Learning Lab. This initial contact is vital because it is at this point that WomenStrong first explains its model to each potential partner and can explore whether participation in the Learning Lab might be beneficial for the organization. It is also an important opportunity to determine whether the organization has programmatic goals that WomenStrong can support.

During the evaluation, what stood out to our grantee partners about this approach to recruitment was the care WomenStrong staff had taken to understand their organizations and how quickly they were able to begin building relationships and mutual understanding with WomenStrong staff through personalized outreach and phone calls.

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*“They contacted us first...a lot of the early meetings were over calls, and that was really cool, because we got to connect in person right away, and kind of experience their values right away.”*

– Partner, Women’s Health Lab cohort

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If organizations are interested in applying for a WomenStrong grant to carry out a project and to participate in the Learning Lab, we then ask potential partners to complete a pre-screening tool to provide background information and brief detail on the proposed project. The pre-screening tool is then reviewed by WomenStrong staff and, if the organization is considered a good fit for the Learning

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*“You don’t get that anywhere else. That kind of capacity to support in helping us really define the issue that we need to be addressing is something very unique about WomenStrong’s approach to the grantmaking process.”*

– Partner, Girls’ Education and Empowerment Lab cohort

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Lab, the prospective partner is invited to submit a full proposal. Our goal is to ensure that by the time organizations invest resources in writing a full proposal, they are well on their way to being funded.

### Intense, but enriching, proposal processes

After potential partners are invited to submit a proposal, they engage in a proposal co-creation process with WomenStrong. They are invited to submit a first draft, which is reviewed and returned to them with guiding questions intended to strengthen the project’s methodological soundness and improve the clarity of the project description. In most cases, conversations about these suggestions are conducted by phone, to walk the partner through WomenStrong’s feedback in a constructive and supportive manner. After that, the organization is invited to submit a second and final draft of the proposal.

Overall, although our partners confirmed that WomenStrong’s proposal process was more intensive than that of other funders, they said that the opportunity to collaborate on their proposal was more valuable than traditional proposal processes they had engaged in, describing our process as “intentional,” “flexible,” “authentic,” and “enriching.” Partners contrasted this experience to other proposal experiences they’d had, where their proposals were often rejected without the opportunity for revision or even, in many cases, without having received any feedback at all. Partners shared how unusual and beneficial it was to be offered the time and thought partnership to design more intentional programs.

Partners identified various ways that WomenStrong’s proposal process positively impacted their proposal-writing capacity. Many partners attested that going through this thorough, intentional proposal process with WomenStrong positively influenced how they

write proposals for other funders. One partner told us that the mutual trust established during their proposal process allowed them to pursue more exciting, riskier projects than they felt comfortable proposing to other funders. Importantly, partners also emphasized that they did not feel pressured to focus on WomenStrong’s priorities during the co-creation process. Instead, they felt respected as experts on their issues and communities and saw WomenStrong’s input as advancing their agenda, not its own.



Photo: Women’s Justice Initiative, Guatemala

### An unusually personal, responsive “partnership”

Partners also reported positive experiences with WomenStrong’s grantmaking approach that extended beyond the recruitment and proposal stages and into their grant period. Specifically, partners described how unusual, but beneficial, the close personal nature of their relationship and communication with WomenStrong has been to-date.

*“I would say that WomenStrong is the most accessible foundation I’ve ever worked with, and they are the most helpful. With almost every foundation you don’t want them to know when you’re having a problem, right? But with WomenStrong you do want them to know when you’re having a problem, because they’ll help you solve it.”*

– Partner, Violence Against Women and Girls Lab cohort

*“I think was really refreshing and helpful to us in terms of how we have approached the grant and the projects, because I think we took a lot more risks in terms of what we... wanted to do and implement and learn, which... I don’t think we always feel comfortable doing.”*

– Partner, Violence Against Women and Girls Lab cohort

Partners appreciated WomenStrong staff’s communication style, describing that they felt cared for and “seen,” both personally and professionally. Compared to other funders, partners said they felt comfortable openly sharing the challenges they were facing, because they knew WomenStrong would be supportive, not critical, and was focused on maximizing learning rather than on delivering specific results.

According to partners, another beneficial aspect of WomenStrong’s communication style was our accessibility and responsiveness, even related to questions not directly related to their grant work, and how proactive WomenStrong was in reaching out to them to offer that support. They described feeling holistically supported in ways that went beyond their specific project grant, which had benefits for the strength of their organizations overall.



Photo: Mujeres Aliadas, Mexico

## Adapting to the COVID Crisis

WomenStrong had the opportunity to test the strength and value of our partnership model when the COVID-19 pandemic began.

WomenStrong reacted rapidly to the emerging pandemic, enacting several shifts in our grantmaking policy in March 2020. As the gravity of the COVID pandemic became apparent, WomenStrong transitioned all our grants from restricted to unrestricted, reduced our reporting requirements, announced that our current partners' funding would be renewed at the end of their existing grant periods, and held individual calls with each of our partners to explain these changes and check in on their plans and immediate needs.

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*“When COVID hit, it was incredible how quickly they were in communication with us, really early on.”*

– Partner, Women’s Health Lab cohort

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Despite the fact that WomenStrong had just begun funding two of our three Learning Lab cohorts that month, and therefore had only very recently established those funding relationships, we felt it was a moral imperative to trust our partners and to give them whatever flexibility they needed to do the work they deemed most important.

Partners' reactions to these shifts in our grantmaking practice in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were extremely positive. Such shifts were often favorably compared to the responsiveness of our partners' other donors, many of whom had communicated their COVID-related responses much later.

Partners described feeling intense relief that WomenStrong's prompt flexibility allowed them to rapidly pivot their work while also taking care of their staff, program participants, and communities. Partners also described feeling affirmed by WomenStrong's trust in them to know what their staff and communities needed most in this time of crisis.

## What's Next for WomenStrong's Grantmaking

The evaluation of WomenStrong's grantmaking processes affirmed that our efforts towards responsive grantmaking are helping us better support the work of our partners. We heard from our grantees that the sense of partnership we build right at the start of each relationship is exceptional and supports them in launching refined, exciting projects. We also heard that the personal attention and holistic support we provide after they join our Learning Lab continues to deepen and strengthen that partnership in ways that are unusual among their funders. We saw how this foundation of trust and our rapid, flexible response helped our partners weather the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

WomenStrong strives to be a donor whose practices are consistently based on trust and equal partnership. Our partners have shown us that we are advancing on this journey, but we also know that we have a distance yet to travel. We will continue to work toward transformative relationships with our partners, and we will continue to develop new processes and practices that make our funding more accessible and supportive to local, women-led organizations working to advance women's rights around the world.

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*“That sort of flexibility and trust, I couldn't ask for anything more from a funder.”*

– Partner, Women’s Health Lab cohort

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