→ QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

Accelerating Innovation & Impact in International Development

Insights for practitioners, funders, and researchers

Executive Summary of a Qualitative Case Study of Effective Approaches to Adapt and Scale Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls Innovations

Womanity

+GEH
CENTER ON GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH

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Attributions & Acknowledgements

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Overview

The world is deeply interconnected, and, so too, are the crises and risks we face. In 2024, the scale and the scope of global challenges seem increasingly complex and intractable. We're hurtling towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) deadline, yet scientific advancements and technological solutions do not seem to bring us closer to the finish line.

Much is at stake if we don't come together to leverage our collective capacities for greater progress and impact. But too often, we squander valuable time and resources reinventing the wheel because we don't have effective processes to share and build on what we've already learned—learnings that can accelerate innovation and take interventions focused on health and wellbeing to scale.

The Womanity Award sought to try something new. In 2014, this unique funding model was launched to support innovation through adaptation and scale up[1] of programmes to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG). Through its unique partnership approach, it also intended to embrace new modalities of collaboration and shift global North-South power imbalances in the process.

As a learning organisation, Womanity instituted an intentional process to onboard feedback from partners and continuously iterate the programme. After four rounds of Award funding, Womanity engaged the University of California San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health (GEH) to conduct a qualitative case study to understand what is working well and how it can continue to improve the model.

This document is an executive summary of this research. It offers insights and process-driven actions that may help bend the curve in achieving SDG targets and to address the tough, interconnected challenges of our time.

IN THIS SUMMARY:

Key elements of successful programme adaptation

Innovation processes that resonate with local communities

Addressing power imbalances to foster equitable partnerships

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1   *ExpandNet definition of scale-up: Deliberate efforts to increase the impact of innovations successfully tested in pilot or experimental projects so as to benefit more people and to foster policy and programme development on a lasting basis.*
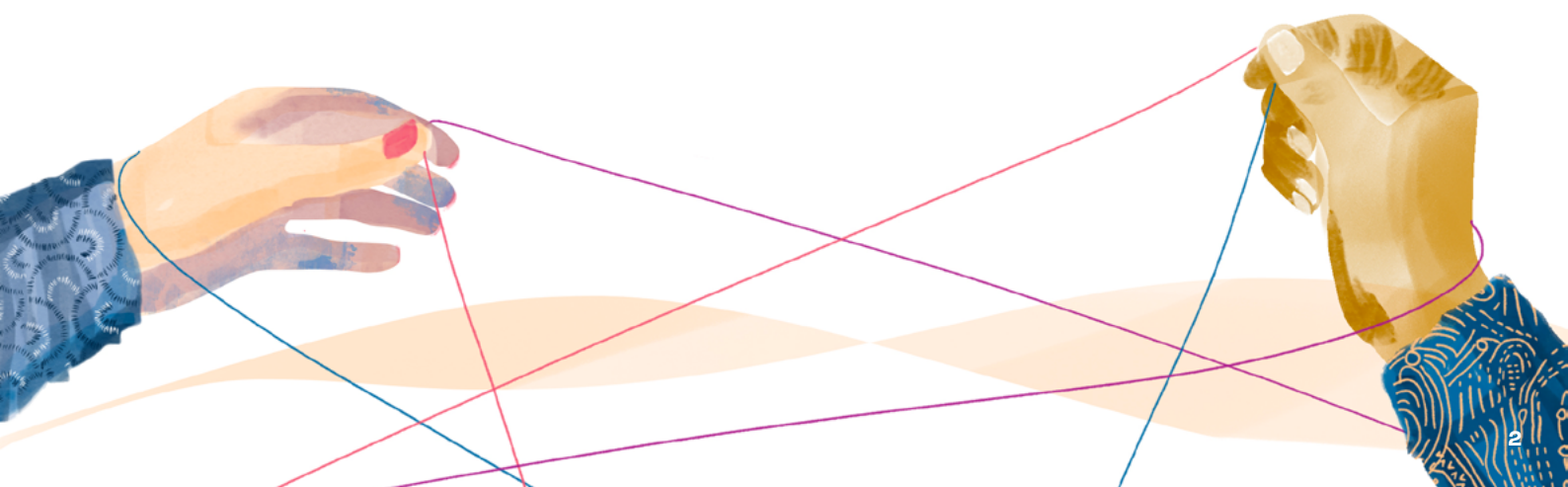
Who can benefit from this summary?

Although The Womanity Award aimed to accelerate adaptation and scale of programmes that prevent VAWG, we learned a lot that is **broadly applicable** to organisations throughout the global development space.

We share this **summary of learnings and recommendations** from our research for *anyone* **working in global development** who, like us, is trying to tackle the thorny questions and tricky balance of innovation and scale.

HERE'S WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS DOCUMENT:

➔ Development Practitioners[2]

How to effectively adapt successful programmes to new contexts/communities so that they *resonate* not just *replicate*.[3]

How to create circular learning environments to accelerate the adaptation process and mitigate potential roadblocks.

➔ Funding Agencies

How to best support adaptation, capacity strengthening, co-learning, and scale.

Ways to structure funding to foster equitable partnerships and address colonial-legacy power imbalances across the Global North:South[4] divide.

➔ Research Institutions

How to structure research teams across the Global North:South divide and centre feminist values in research.

Guidance about developing equitable, rather than extractive, relationships with study participants.

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2   *Global and local NGOs, CSOs, grassroots and advocacy organisations, etc.*

3   *We differentiate replication and adaptation. Replication simply copies and pastes the original idea to a new context without contextualising; adaptation maintains the core elements and values of a programme while contextualising it with the new community.*

4   *The division between Global North and Global South is widely accepted but we recognise it has some shortcomings as it can be a simplistic way to divide countries between more and less developed in economic terms. More information can be found here.*

Shifting the Paradigm: Achieving Effective Adaptation & Scale-Up

THE CHALLENGE

Pilot interventions are successful on a small scale, but few have been scaled up to have population-level impact.

Adaptation and scale. These two issues loom large in the global development space. Whether you work in clean water, renewable energy, community health, gender equity, poverty reduction, or any other field, our ability to effectively adapt and disseminate learnings from successful interventions is often the biggest roadblock to achieving widespread impact.

On the road to human and planetary flourishing, we are not lacking in scientific progress or technological advancements. But we often miss critical opportunities to leverage, localise, and learn from existing interventions already proven to create change. Valuable resources are consumed reinventing the wheel—when **what we need** are investments in **effective processes** and **partnership models** that **adapt & scale proven approaches**. Unfortunately, there's no proven model for supporting scale-up.

OUR RESPONSE

Design a new partnership model that is effective in adapting innovative solutions with potential to achieve population-level impact and still be relevant to local communities.

Womanity Award Model

The Womanity Award aims to accelerate the scale-up of innovative models for addressing VAWG in the Global South. But instead of continually funding new pilot interventions in each new country/context, the Womanity Award was designed as a novel partnership model and investment strategy.

Innovation Partner

Has an innovative, evidence-based programme that addresses violence against women and girls

LEARNING

LEARNING

Scale-Up Partner

Understands the new context, has relationships with local communities and key stakeholders
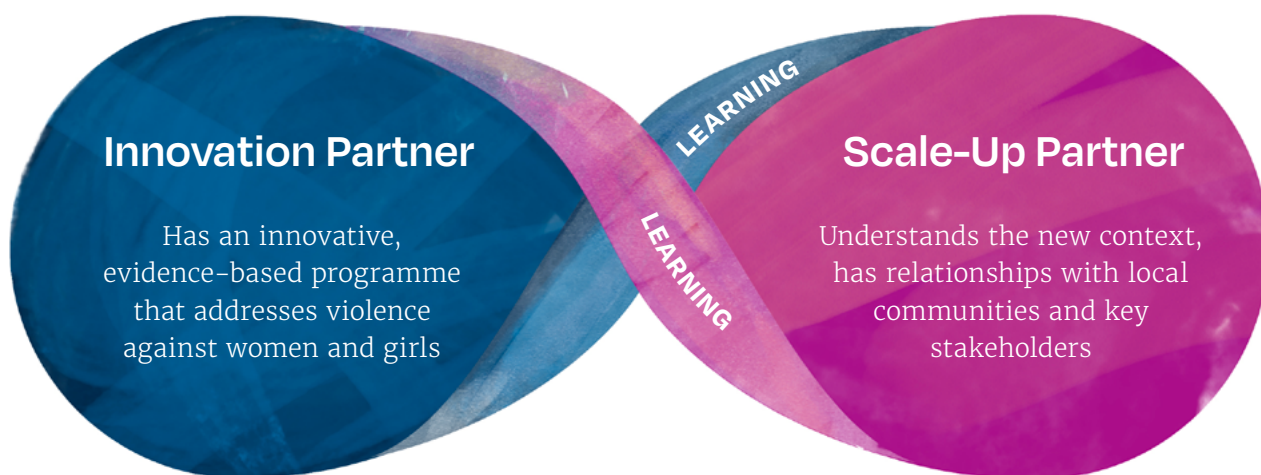
The unique partnership model grants funding to a pair of innovative women's rights organisations in the Global South to leverage promising strategies for VAWG prevention. Partners apply together for the 3-year programme based on mission alignment and shared feminist values (Womanity does not match organisations).

THE PARTNER PAIR INCLUDES:

Innovation Partner

Organisation with an innovative, evidence-based VAWG prevention programme. The Womanity Award enables this organisation to increase their reach and learn how to best adapt their programme to a different context.

Scale-Up Partner

Organisation that is well-positioned to adapt the intervention to its local context. The Womanity Award enables this organisation to adapt and deliver a new programme in their own context.

Womanity Award Features

Womanity provides both financial and non-financial support to the pair of partners. This has evolved over time in response to feedback from the partners.

ADAPTATION SUPPORT

Funding for the partners to adapt the innovation to a new context. Nurtures expertise at a local level.

ACCOMPANIMENT

Womanity accompanies the partners, actively supporting them in reflection and improving project processes. Cultivates a three-way collaboration and learning environment between Womanity and the partners.

AMPLIFY VOICES

Support to partners at conferences and dissemination events, and linkages to expanded VAWG-prevention networks.

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

After a thorough needs assessment, development support is provided to both organisations to address areas critical for their sustainability and resilience.

SELF-CARE

Funding to support the self-care needs that organisations define for themselves, such as individual staff care *(e.g. gym memberships, yoga classes)* and/ or collective organisational care *(e.g. celebratory meetings, staff meals).*

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING (MEL)

Funding support for independent external experts (if needed) to work with partners to strengthen their MEL approaches and work with them on baseline, midline, and end-line development and learning evaluations.

Womanity Award Investment Strategy

Womanity's vision differs from traditional models of donor-grantee relationships. Beyond its aim to support effective adaptation and scale-up of VAWG innovations, the funding aims to embody feminist values and contribute to transforming colonial-legacy power imbalances in global development. In developing its strategy, Womanity asked itself:

How might we...

➜ Invest in a feminist adaptation and scale process/framework?

➜ Shift the power dynamics of top-down international technical assistance models, where programmes are developed, tested, and funded by organisations in the Global North?

➜ Devolve power from donors to cultivate more equitable and inclusive partnerships?

➜ Fund programmes that are more relevant to the needs and interests of communities committed to violence prevention work?

➜ Cultivate South:South transnational collaboration for adaptation and scale of promising/proven strategies to prevent VAWG?

STATUS QUO	WOMANITY AWARD MODEL
Replicate successful pilot interventions in new countries without contextual adaptation	Fund a carefully supported process of adaptation to take proven solutions to scale
North:South technical assistance that reinforces colonial legacy power imbalances	South:South transnational collaboration
Deferential, top-down relationships with donors, where power is located with funders in the Global North	Collaborative, trust-based technical assistance relationships with donors with intentional space for honest reflection, feedback, and action
Gender-neutral philanthropy	Feminist funding principles

The Study

Womanity commissioned a study, led by GEH, to understand whether the Womanity Award model was having its intended impacts. All four rounds of the Award were analysed alongside a comparison case funded by the John Templeton Foundation (see Table 1). Research methods are summarised in the box below.

Research Methods

STUDY AIMS

- Capture and share learnings from the Womanity Award to inform the field on effective models and partnerships to scale up proven approaches to prevent VAWG.

- Provide insights to improve the Womanity Award model and process.

QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

Qualitative Case Study of four rounds of Womanity Award funding:

- **31 in-depth interviews** (29 with partners; 2 with Womanity staff)
- **3 focus group discussions**
- **40+ project documents reviewed**

UNIT OF ANALYSIS

Each Womanity Award partnership (n=4)

COMPARISON CASE

A technical assistance partnership, in which organisations in the Global North provided institutional capacity strengthening to their partners in the Global South. Funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

TABLE 1 | Research Case Descriptions

CASE PROGRAMME ADAPTED (TARGET POPULATION)	INNOVATION COUNTRY	ADAPTATION COUNTRY	INNOVATION PARTNER	SCALE-UP PARTNER
WOMANITY AWARD #1 **Program H** *(men and boys)*	Brazil	→ Lebanon	equimundo	أبعاد abaad
WOMANITY AWARD #2 **Take Back the Tech Campaign** *(women in all their diversity)*	South Africa	→ Mexico	APC ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS	LUCHADORAS La Sandia Digital
WOMANITY AWARD #3 **Safetipin** *(women in all their diversity)*	India	→ South Africa	SAFETIPIN Supporting Safer Cities	SOUL CITY INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE
WOMANITY AWARD #4 **Legal Empowerment Training and Community Care Model** *(women in all their diversity)*	Brazil	→ Cape Verde	30 THEMIS	ASSOCIAÇÃO CABO-VERDIANE DE LUTA CONTRA A VIOLÊNCIF BASEADA NO GÉNERO
COMPARISON CASE **Transforming Masculinities** *(married couples & faith communities)*	Multiple Countries	→ Nigeria	tearfund Institute for Reproductive Health Georgetown University	FAITH ALIVE EAM COMMUNITY INTEGRATED HEALTH DEVELOPMENT ADVANCEMENT

Findings

Little empirical evidence exists about effective partnership models to adapt and scale successful innovations. This study provides insights about the adaptation process, relationships, and power in global development partnerships for practitioners, as well as recommendations specific to donors and researchers.

Adaptation Process

Although impact evaluations have not been conducted on the programmes funded through the Womanity Award, there were several measures of success among them:

In all cases, the adapted programmes resonated with and were accepted by the communities for which they were adapted.

Nearly all grantees received additional external funding to continue implementing or further scaling the adapted intervention or similar programmes.

All partners continued to engage in collaborations with each other after the projects ended.

What works to successfully adapt programmes?

Actively involve original programme designers

Our findings suggest it is important that the individuals who originally designed the VAWG programme (Innovation Partner staff) actively provide guidance throughout the adaptation process. This helped ensure programme adaptations aligned with the values and principles embedded in the original model. And it ensured that the core elements of the programme design and implementation process were carried out with quality and fidelity.

RESULT

➔ Adaptation comes as a result of close collaboration among partners.

Grounding the adaptation process in shared values & principles is important—and challenging.

Some partners reported that aligning their vision and values enabled them to successfully adapt the programme and overcome challenges. Other partners found this to be difficult due to various levels of understanding of core vs peripheral components of the intervention and partners' positionalities/power dynamics.

"The process of methodological adaptation is never linear, and we are dealing with two different, distinct realities that need adaptation. And so methodologically speaking, we started from a pre-supposition that we would need to keep on learning, altering things, we had to make adjustments. I think we had cultural differences that we had to take into account, as well, and understand how things work for both of our countries. I think it took us longer than we imagined…"

— INNOVATION PARTNER

Engage a diverse array of local stakeholders & community partners

Fully involving community members and leaders and a diverse array of other local stakeholders from project design to implementation helped support the adaptation and validation process. Not only were the programme adaptations more resonant, this engagement also cultivated trust with the community. Projects created mechanisms for community partners to provide input and feedback about programme adaptations, which were kept open even beyond project duration. Other efforts, such as community-based monitoring and local dissemination events, built a favourable environment for institutionalisation and future scale-up.

RESULTS

→ Incorporated perspectives of local leaders into programme adaptations.

→ Programme adaptations that "resonated" rather than "replicated".

→ Fostered sustainability of project impacts.

→ Uptake of evidence and integration of the programme into existing local systems and processes *(e.g. municipal data dashboard)*.

Create circular learning environments

Intentionally designing circular learning environments between partners is critical to successful programme adaptation. In a world that prioritises and rewards 'efficiency,' creating virtual and in-person spaces for mutual learning and reflection requires intention and ongoing commitment from all partners throughout the project life cycle. It also requires building in adequate time for it in work planning and budgeting.

Though circular learning environments introduce a non-linear trajectory for programme adaptation and often increase the time it takes to build consensus, it often energises those involved and creates a sense of joy and meaning in the work. It also cultivates a strong sense of trust and respect between partners, resulting in interventions that ultimately resonate more deeply with communities.

RESULTS

→ Scale-Up Partners gained experience adapting, implementing, and evaluating a new programme in their local context.

→ Innovation Partners also onboarded learnings from Scale-Up Partners—they built on their knowledge and adapted tools and project materials to other VAWG programmes they were implementing in different contexts.

→ Womanity integrated learnings from partners to improve the Award model
(e.g., funding for organisational development and self-care; streamlined selection processes).

→ Sparked unexpected positive changes to the original programme—the intervention was aligned with community needs, preserved outcomes from the original programme, and integrated more seamlessly than the original model.
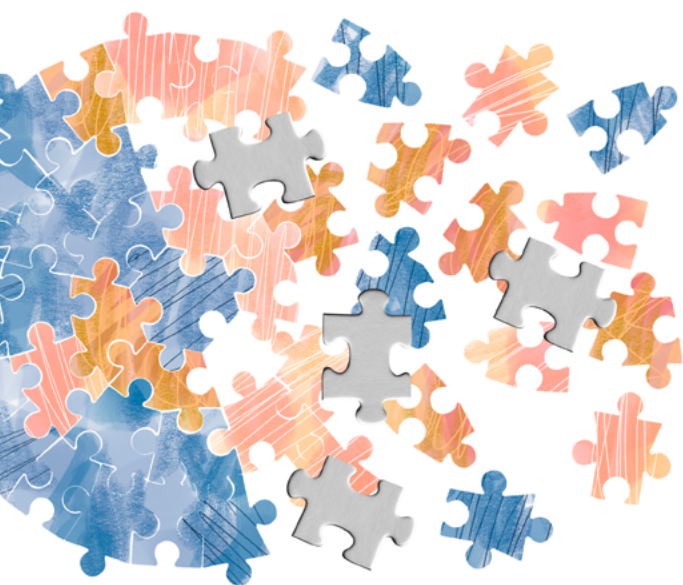
"We are very different organisations. It took time for both of us to recognise how much we can learn from each other. At some point, it seemed like our skills were so different, it seemed like they were not building on each other. But actually, when I look back now, it was tremendous in terms of how we learned, as well as how much they learned."

— INNOVATION PARTNER

THESE ELEMENTS PROMOTED CIRCULAR LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS:

Communication systems & processes among all project partners to regularly share knowledge, exchange ideas, and build on respective strengths. These included:

- Weekly/bi-weekly meetings between Innovation and Scale-Up partners
- Monthly/bi-monthly meetings between partners and Womanity
- Safe spaces to understand each others' lived experience, cultural backgrounds, and feminist perspectives
- Jointly writing project deliverables and annual reports

"We had what were known as 'jam sessions.' And we were very purposeful about what sort of skills needed to be shared, for example, in evaluation and planning. It was structured in this sort of sharing and building, and also coming together to share what everyone was doing, and giving each other feedback. It was a constant process that we did throughout the project."
— INNOVATION PARTNER

Adaptation documentation: Developing a system to document the adaptations being made helps to inform future adaptations. One project developed a centralised "learning log" (e.g. documenting why and how adaptations were made, who was involved in making these decisions, and outcomes of implementing these adaptations).

Learning visits: The Womanity Award provided funding for Innovation Partners to visit the Scale-up Partners' sites and vice versa.[5] This helped partners improve their understanding of the intervention and local context, build strong relationships, and ultimately resulted in a more relevant and successful adaptation.

"...the second one [learning visit] was when we started the project, looking at how [programme name] was implemented in [IP country], and they had done the first one there. This gave us a lot of important questions of 'Where did we want to go if this is successful?' and 'What are the different ways that it could grow?' Even on a personal level, it gave me the opportunity to grow."
— SCALE-UP PARTNER

Networking & capacity-strengthening opportunities: Womanity provided funding to partners to attend conferences and dissemination events, and connected them to broader VAWG prevention networks. This not only amplified partners' voices, it also provided professional networking and development opportunities that catalysed broader growth and learning.

OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPROVEMENT

More community-building among partners may catalyse additional learning and innovation.

Partners said they wished Womanity had created a "Womanity community"—a way for current and past partners to connect for more cross-learning, networking, and other opportunities to build partnerships.

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5   *The funded visits happened mostly during the Selection Process*

Provide technical assistance & organisational development support

Womanity staff met monthly or bi-monthly with partners to accompany them throughout the adaptation process. Womanity also offered opportunities like organisational strategic development and funding for external MEL consultants. Additionally, Womanity connected partners to additional funding opportunities beyond the Award period to sustain and further scale project impacts. This approach to technical assistance enabled Womanity to learn from and build strong relationships with partners, and also positioned them to better understand the context within which the programme was being implemented and respond to shifting partner needs.

"They [Womanity staff] were eager to engage in brainstorming, eager to provide inputs, but also eager to follow our lead. So they were really both bringing in good inputs from a technical perspective, because of the women's rights background, but also acknowledging that they were not experts of either the context or the technical aspect. So they were willing to take a step back and just be listeners at times."

— **INNOVATION PARTNER**

RESULTS

➜   Womanity was responsive to partners' emergent needs to better support the adaptation process.

➜   Womanity had a strong understanding of the work being done, as well as the ways in which the project contributed to moving the field of violence prevention forward.

OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPROVEMENT

Receiving technical assistance and support from donors offers opportunities—and creates burdens.

Womanity's support and deep engagement with partners offered opportunities for knowledge sharing and the strengthening of institutional capacities above and beyond the project's immediate needs. At the same time, some partners expressed concerns about the level of donor involvement, and felt that support from Womanity did not always align with their priorities and interests. Others felt it was challenging to 'opt out' of these opportunities and that at times it created a significant amount of unbudgeted work. This begs the questions:

Q: How much is too much donor involvement?

Q: When it comes to technical assistance and support from donors, what are the best approaches for strengthening organisational capacities while not overburdening partners?

The comparison case returned similar results—even without intensive reflective learning processes or high donor involvement.

Interestingly, the study comparison case was found to implement the project in ways that deeply resonated with the communities and showed promising results, yet there was much less emphasis on collective reflection and institutional capacity strengthening among all project actors.

WE WONDERED:

Partners seemed to value and grow from the learning and involvement from Womanity through the Award—but are they necessary for effective adaptation and scale?

Relationships & Power

Oftentimes, Innovation Partners were perceived (at least initially) to have more power over Scale-Up Partners, who had no previous experience adapting and scaling the programme created by the Innovation Partner. In the majority of cases, they were also younger organisations with less experience managing grant funding and complex partnerships.

"Working together, we were not necessarily [in] this hierarchy. I mean, there was some hierarchical stuff in it. But I think there was a horizontal approach where we want to be equally involved. Because of the nature of the project and the Award, we sort of had more power. But I think we also tried to be really conscious of it. And make sure that there was space for them [Scale-Up Partner] to lead, as well."

— INNOVATION PARTNER

Additionally, there are longstanding historical power imbalances between donors and grantees, particularly across the Global North:South divide, that Womanity explicitly attempted to address through the Award principles and processes.

Here's what this research revealed was effective in achieving more horizontal, power-balanced partnerships.

What works to successfully cultivate equitable partnerships?

Committing to horizontality and collective decision-making

Several elements were essential to make partnerships more horizontal between Innovation and Scale-Up Partners and between the partners and Womanity. These things built a sense of **trust and flexibility** to resolve disagreements and make decisions collectively:

- Openness to dialogue and frequent meetings to cultivate mutual understanding of needs and interests.

- Developing systems and processes to make the partnership as participatory and inclusive as possible.

- Creating physical and virtual spaces that built trust and a sense of community by embodying feminist values around the joy of relationships and creating opportunities to actively work on relationships with openness, respect, and care.

- Embracing shared leadership.

- Clearly defining and dividing roles and responsibilities.

"During the feedback sessions with Womanity, we felt capable of being transparent. I might have been a bit afraid, honestly. It is not always easy to believe in a transparent process based on trust [when] the other party has the power to pull funding from you. But we did see that we were heard, that we were listened to, and that the needle was shifted when we did have a particular request."

— SCALE-UP PARTNER

RESULTS

→ Partners described partnership as non-competitive, which led to growth and learning, especially for junior/mid-level staff.

→ Collective communication and trust strengthened relationships between partners and Womanity.

Practising reflexivity

Reflexivity is the practice of reflecting on one's personal positionality and how our multiple identities inform our perspectives and actions. Our findings suggest it is equally important to reflect on relational dynamics and power differentials between/among organisations. This was especially true for the organisation with greater perceived power (Innovation Partner and Womanity). To embed this practice, multiple, ongoing opportunities should be created to respectfully dialogue about:

- Structural differences between organisations (e.g. being of variable size and age, having different financial/human resources available for the project).

- Differences in socio-historical and cultural contexts and geographies that might give rise to power imbalances.

- Areas of alignment and difference in personal and organisational values and principles.

- How power is wielded in institutional partnerships so that they can become more equitable and balanced.

"I think if one begins to unpack and reflect on the power relations, you can probably build better partnerships."

— INNOVATION PARTNER

"As an originally Brazilian organisation, we have always been very conscious about trying to avoid the traditional Global North–Global South power dynamics. And yet now, most of us are based in the Global North. So it was really nice to be working with [Womanity] that really understood the desire of challenging those dynamics, and really supporting an egalitarian partnership. Supporting dialogue, supporting time to spend together to really build the community... that's hard to do when you don't actually spend time learning together, and when that is not supported by the funder. I think the way in which the grant was structured was really trying to break down those barriers and really encourage the spirit of collaboration."
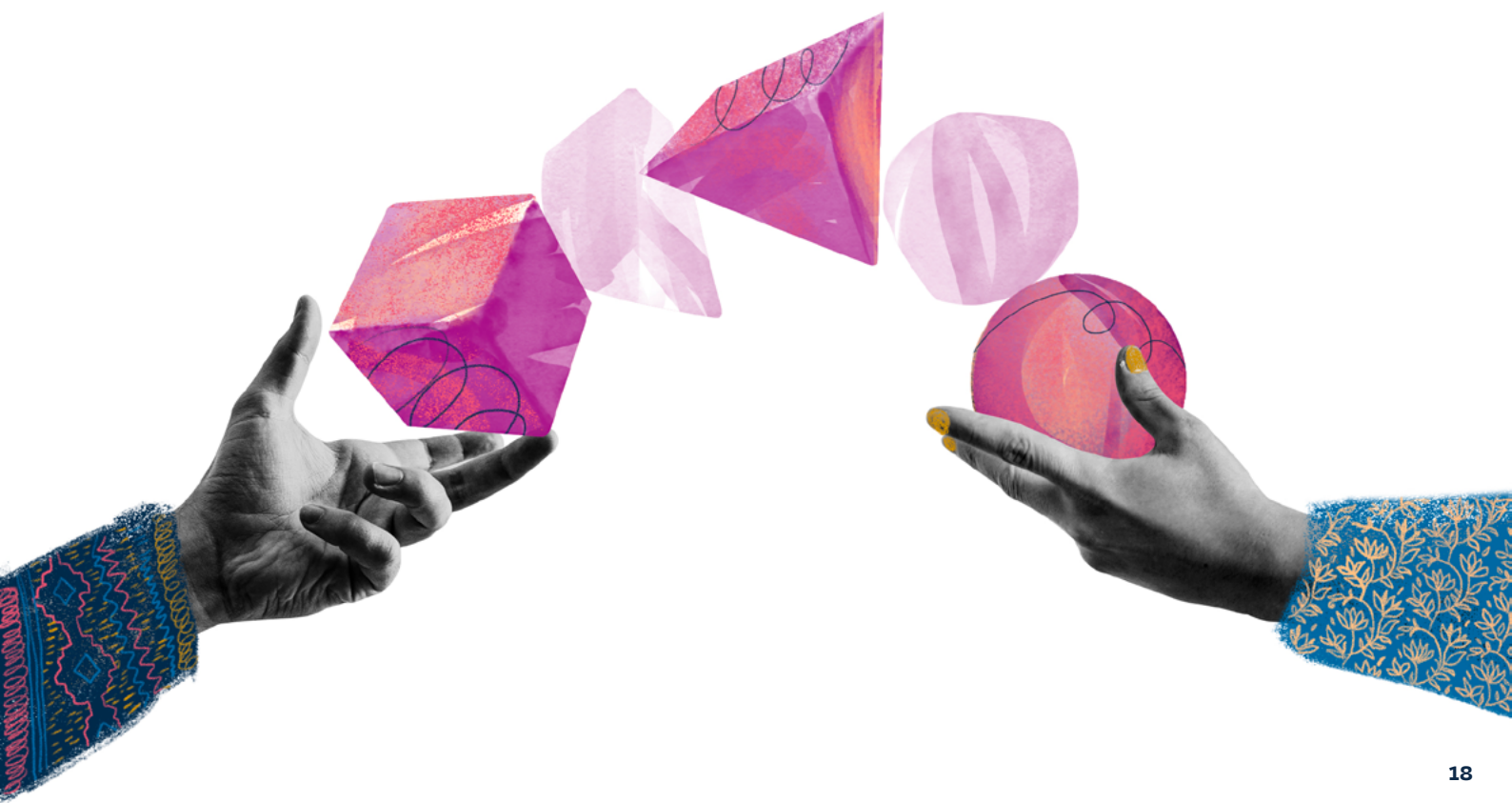
— **INNOVATION PARTNER**

RESULTS

➜ Innovation Partners shifted their perspective from seeing themselves as experts mentoring Scale-Up Partners to seeing the partnership as two organisations coming together with complementary skill-sets and experiences.

➜ Partners were able to successfully navigate major cultural differences.

Funders demonstrating a strong willingness to learn from partners, and establishing effective feedback and accountability mechanisms

Womanity intentionally set the tone with partners at the beginning of each Award cycle that they were committed to changing traditional North-South power dynamics—this included a strong willingness to learn from the process and iterate the Award model.

Specific actions to accomplish this included:

APPLICATION PROCESS

Womanity articulated their strong commitment to balanced power, mutual respect, and learning in the funding application.

PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT NEGOTIATION

In later rounds of the Award, Womanity discussed a partnership agreement through a participatory process, instead of imposing contractual terms. Improvements to this process are ongoing.

IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD

Womanity established ample opportunities for partner feedback during each Award cycle (e.g. written feedback forms, monthly meetings, informal conversations, reflection questions embedded in bi–annual progress reports).

BETWEEN AWARDS

Womanity made systematic changes to the Award, based on implementation experiences and partners' feedback.

"I think initially, we were a bit unsure why we had to meet with [Womanity staff] quite so regularly. So initially, it took us a while to get used to that, but when we experienced difficulties, it helped that we had such a close relationship, because it felt like we were discussing the challenges … that hierarchical relationship wasn't so strong. It made it easy for us to reflect together on what's the possible solution. So it took time to get used to, but it removed that hierarchical barrier that would normally be there."

— SCALE-UP PARTNER

RESULTS

➔ Many partners felt safe to provide suggestions and feedback to Womanity.

➔ Though challenging at times, Womanity's high level of involvement allowed for greater flexibility to meet partners' needs throughout the Award and successfully complete the project.

➔ Partners felt supported in a horizontal relationship with the funder.

Power imbalances are pervasive and require ongoing effort to shift them.

Despite the intentionality, dedicated space for communication, and a learning framework, power dynamics in partnerships are difficult to change. This was true both between Innovation and Scale-Up Partners as well as between partners and Womanity. The status quo has a 'stickiness' to it, especially when the broader context reinforces existing hierarchies.

"They [Innovation Partners] were learning culturally what needs to be changed in order for the programme to be effective, but it didn't necessarily dictate that they could learn things from a third-world gender perspective. And there is a thing that we learn from second-wave feminism, that sometimes that hegemony finds its way into global North-ish perspectives that aren't realistic for the Global South. This was done inadvertently in some ways. Like, they were the people who were going to teach us about how to do this... we were experts of our culture. So, there was an effort to give some parity. But again, it felt more like experts [Innovation Partners] and people with potential [Scale-Up Partners]."

— **SCALE-UP PARTNER**

"One has to be careful not to feel patronised by the level of involvement. I think as we came to understand where Womanity was coming from, it felt much better. In the early stages, it maybe felt a bit patronising."

— **SCALE-UP PARTNER**

Despite these challenges, partners pinpointed specific areas where Womanity can take additional action to move the needle, which it is working to incorporate into its Award model and processes.

High donor involvement sometimes cultivates horizontality—and sometimes stifles it.

Partners had mixed attitudes about the ways in which Womanity engaged with them in knowledge-sharing and learning processes.

Some study participants said that frequent meetings with Womanity staff helped build trust and facilitate a collaborative, non-hierarchical dynamic and that Womanity was a true partner and 'fellow traveller' in this work. Others felt Womanity's involvement was too demanding, or that they could not be fully candid due to inherent and historical donor-grantee power dynamics, going on to highlight that if Womanity is aiming to cultivate a learning and sharing process that runs parallel to all other project activities, expectations should be clarified around time management and the use of practice-based knowledge.

THIS COLLECTIVE FEEDBACK LED US TO REFLECT ON THE FOLLOWING:

Due to the nature of the relationship between donors and grantees, power imbalances cannot be completely removed. However, efforts can be made to minimise imbalances.

Partners may have been reluctant to trust Womanity's intentions to create balanced power dynamics given longstanding historical power differentials.

AND TO ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AS WE CONTINUE TO IMPROVE THE AWARD MODEL:

Q:

How might we foster equitable North-South partnerships given these confounding dynamics?

Q:

How do we balance level of engagement with the desire to create a more horizontal partnership structure?

Q:

How can knowledge-sharing and collective decision-making processes be structured to more closely centre and uphold partner needs and agency?

For Donors

Womanity's funding approach differs from traditional models. Below we share our reflections and learnings with other donors in global development who are eager to: 1) support effective adaptation and scale-up of innovations to meet our collective goals for human and planetary flourishing; and/ or 2) disrupt colonial power differentials.

Investing for Adaptation and Scale-Up

> Funding structures can help facilitate or hinder successful adaptations of innovative programmes.

Below are recommendations stemming from the research about how change happens with and between the partners as a direct result of the Womanity Award.

Empathy Building

Creating more horizontal funding relationships requires intentional empathy-building efforts. Ensuring the donor has a diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy is critical to this effort, including, whenever feasible, having staff who have lived experience working in the contexts where they are funding work. Travel visits can also help donors develop a deeper understanding of the programme context, build human relationships with partner staff, and gain an understanding of their partners' operational realities. In the case of the Womanity Award, funding learning visits for partners to visit each other's sites/programmes is also critical to promote contextual understanding, mutual learning, and effective adaptation processes.

Community-Centric Approaches

Currently, donor-funded work often prioritises reaching big numbers quickly using a "copy-and-paste" process for adapting successful programmes to new communities. To facilitate adaptations that are meaningful to the new context, it is critical to re-center the work around people who are part of, identify with, and care about the communities impacted by these programmes. This ensures that local communities set the agenda to be better aligned with local realities, needs, interests, and local feminist definitions (not necessarily Western feminism).

Flexibility

Offering multi-year flexible funding where the partner pair determines how to share the budget enables them to fully realise project milestones. Regular meetings with partners enabled Womanity to understand and respond to any shifting project needs as the process unfolded, and empowered partners to advocate for work planning or budget revisions to accommodate these needs. Yet flexibility does not mean continuously renegotiating everything—mutually agreed-upon frameworks and systems of accountability are still necessary.

Holistic Organisational Support

When organisations are healthy and sustainable as a whole, it strengthens their capacity to successfully implement adapted programmes, gain more visibility in their respective technical domains, and attract additional funding. This also better positions organisations to be able to continue implementing/scaling after the grant period, and also leverages their expertise for other funding opportunities in alignment with their strategic visions. As such, donors should support both project-specific needs/interests and organisational development and capacity-strengthening needs.

Womanity found it successful to fund four
areas beyond the programme adaptation itself:

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Funding dedicated to the areas in which each organisation determined it needed support (e.g., strategic planning, communications, HR, etc.).

SELF-CARE

Providing funding for partners to offer self-care to prevent and address ongoing demands, long working hours, stress, and burnout.

AMPLIFYING VOICES

Sponsoring attendance to conferences and connecting partners to broader technical networks leveraging the connections and networks the donor has in their particular technical field (in Womanity's case, VAWG).

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

Funding support from independent external experts (if needed) to work with partners to strengthen their MEL and work with them on baseline, midline, and end-line development and learning evaluations.

Cultivating More Equitable Partnerships

> Power imbalance is a dimension that cannot be completely removed in donor relationships. But we *can* make a conscious effort to recognise how power manifests and to minimise imbalances.

Building Trust

To cultivate non-hierarchical partnership structures, it is essential for donors to build and maintain relationships with grantees that **create a sense of trust**. We found that **ongoing dialogue** guided by a feminist perspective and intentions to reduce power differentials has encouraged more trust and horizontal relationships between the Innovation and Scale-Up Partners, as well as between the partners and Womanity.

We also found that it **takes time** for trust to be built in a way that relationships can be more horizontal. Sometimes, we think we are whispering something, but partners may be listening as if we were using a megaphone. We hope that as relationships evolve, partners see that we really mean what we say and feel free to share openly. It is a journey that can only be done together.

Equity-Oriented Action

Small, consistent actions reinforce stated values of equity *and* **foster trust** among grantees in our stated intentions to devolve power.

Here are some small (and not-so-small) actions we found to begin to **shift the balance of power** with our grantees:

→ Practise what we preach: honour diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging within our own organisation.

→ Remunerate partners for their time and human resources expended during the intensive selection process. Also offer mentoring with experts during this process. This enabled partner teams to more fully and equitably participate.

→ Provide funding directly to organisations working within the communities where the project is taking place. This helps eliminate some of the sources of power imbalances. It also ensures that communities and local partners get paid on time and are compensated fairly for the work they do.

→ Horizontal partnerships and participatory processes require time and effort from all parties. We have learned the importance of discussing partners' appetite for participatory approaches and clarify upfront the time commitment needed.

→ Ask partners to set meeting cadences and agendas, instead of dictating them.

→ Offer translators for calls and allow partners to report in their own language so they are not forced to communicate in the donor's language all the time.[6]

→ Create participatory decision-making mechanisms where everyone has equal voice.

6 *Currently, the Womanity Award application process is only in English. Ideally, it would be facilitated in other languages, but as a small organisation, Womanity does not have the structure or resources to do so. Depending on available resources, donors should consider making the application process available in languages relevant to the local context.*

For Researchers

This study itself offered insights into how research institutions can foster equitable partnerships and embed feminist principles into their work.

Team Composition

We recommend forming research teams with complementary skills and experience. Research teams that traverse the Global North:South should actively uphold commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This involves, as much as possible, meaningful inclusion of research team members who have been, or are currently, living and working in the contexts where the projects are based. Team members in the Global North should regularly reflect on the power they wield and actively work to shift power and make space for their colleagues in the Global South.

Values

Conducting research that upholds feminist values requires study team members to embody values and principles such as trust, open communication, accountability, and reflexivity. Research teams may be more successful in this pursuit if they:

→   Build a culture of collaborative and horizontal decision-making and commitment to iterative learning.

→   Articulate and embody shared team values, such as flexibility, adaptability, and humility, to foster more equitable partnerships.

→   Create an Advisory Board composed of individuals committed to feminist values and principles who can accompany and support the research team in navigating potential challenges and roadblocks throughout the research process.

Regenerative vs. Extractive Processes

Promoting equitable knowledge generation and sharing rather than extractive research practices requires care throughout the entire research process. Here are some of our recommendations to facilitate this:

➜ Co-create research design with study participants and communicate regularly along the way, allowing for discussion of data collection approaches, validation of research questions and tools, and the ways results will be interpreted, validated, and shared.

➜ Offer multiple opportunities for study participants and other actors to meaningfully provide input throughout the research process. For example, in this study we engaged study participants in multiple rounds of validation and feedback. Importantly, this addressed the research team's limitations in understanding and interpreting results. It also ensured the findings met study participants' needs and fostered ownership in research utilisation efforts.

➜ Within the research team, co-create authorship guidelines, as well as systems and processes for developing and sharing knowledge products.

➜ Disseminate research findings through diverse channels to reach multiple audiences, and create space for ongoing dialogue and reflection among those involved in the study.

Reflexivity

Research, particularly an investigation of partnership and power, can be rewarding, but it is also uncomfortable at times. Each individual perceives reality according to their own lived experiences, social location, and intersecting identities. Understanding these complex, multiple realities requires openness, empathy, and humility. It is helpful for research teams to have regular meetings to reflect on their approach and findings, and practise reflexivity on their own positionalities and potential biases. It is also important to share study findings in ways that are conducive to collective learning and action, so the diversity of perspectives are valued and fairly represented in a cohesive narrative.
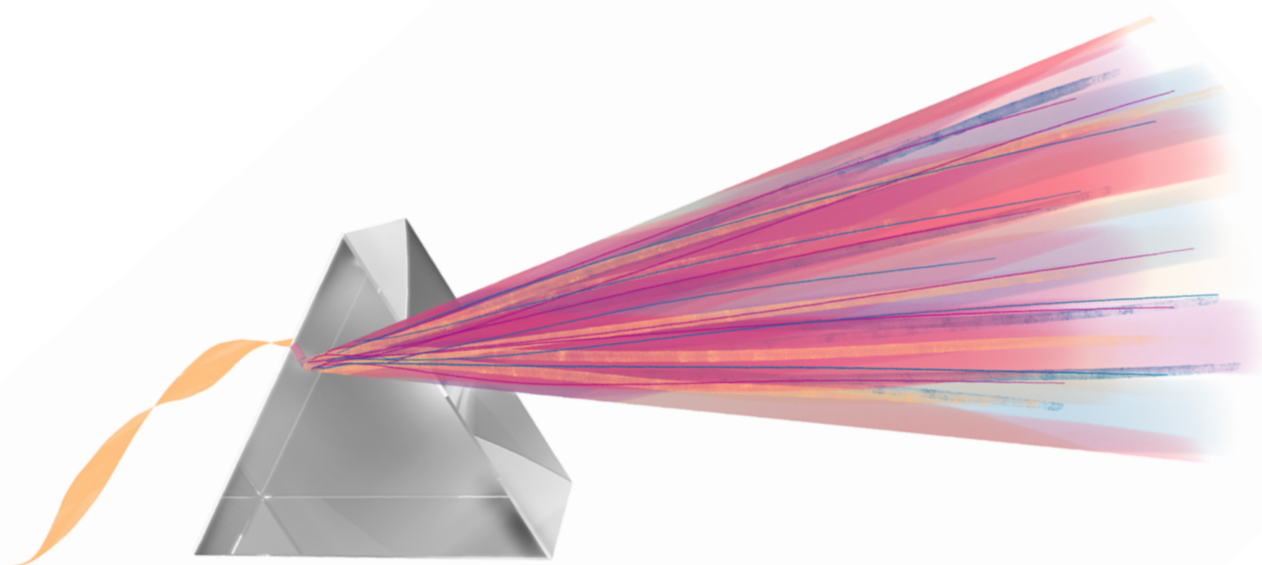
Conclusion

Leveraging our collective, global capacities for greater progress and impact is critical to achieving the SDGs and for fostering human and planetary flourishing in our increasingly complex world.

We are part of an ecosystem where philanthropy and global development perpetuate colonising approaches that limit our ability to make the necessary progress.

The Womanity Award aimed to structure donor funding in a new way to accelerate innovation and scale-up for VAWG programmes while intentionally challenging inherent power imbalances to achieve broader social impact. Cultivating horizontal, equitable partnerships that challenge historical donor-grantee dynamics requires open and consistent dialogue, shared decision-making, and a commitment to reflexive practices.

For effective adaptation and scaling, we learned that meaningfully engaging a broad spectrum of community stakeholders ensures that programme adaptations are not merely replicated but resonate deeply. Engaging the original programme designers and grounding the adaptation process in shared principles and values ensures that interventions are effective in the new context while still attaining the outcomes of the original programme.

Finally, creating circular learning environments was key to navigating sociocultural complexity and in supporting the non-linear nature of adaptation and scaling. We apply that here in sharing these study findings with the broader global development community. And we look forward to being in dialogue with other actors bold enough to challenge the status quo for more effective partnership models.

ABOUT WOMANITY

Womanity is a pioneering nonprofit committed to accelerating gender equality through innovative and strategic investments. With nearly 20 years of experience, they support gender-transformative initiatives in some of the most challenging and underfunded environments, delivering educational, economic, and social programmes that empower women and girls. By promoting and investing in entrepreneurial ideas across India, Afghanistan, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa, Womanity drives transformative change, impacting 31 million people worldwide.

→ womanity.org

ABOUT THE CENTER ON GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH (GEH) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

The Center on Gender Equity and Health is an action-oriented collective of researchers, policy specialists, and development experts working to eliminate gender inequities through impactful research, intervention testing, and capacity building and bridging. Their goal is collective impact at scale in partnership with communities, governments, NGOs and INGOs, and partnering academic institutions. They believe gender equity, health, and dignity for all people is achievable.

→ geh.ucsd.edu