



A Feminist Approach to Common Applications & Reports: Lessons from the Gender Funders CoLab

JANUARY 2023



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Feminist organizations and movements have long urged funders to be more strategic and responsive in their grantmaking to support social change. Feminists have asked funders to be bold, take risks, and join them in learning together about how change happens. They call on funders to develop practices that support movement building rather than drain energy, time, and resources from that critical work.

For the private foundations that belong to the [Gender Funders CoLab](#), answering this call has meant exploring new ways to manage grant applications and reports. This led to its initiative to establish feminist common application and report forms and processes (FCAR).

Established in 2014, the Gender Funders CoLab came together to share knowledge, deepen networks, and expand resources for gender justice. It supports a better-connected and better-resourced ecosystem of groups and funds dedicated to gender justice and feminist organizing.

This report documents CoLab members' efforts to align funding practices with feminist values. Over the summer of 2022, [Informing Change](#), a strategic learning firm based in California, was retained to complete an assessment of the FCAR initiative as it transitioned from the pilot phase to an ongoing program.

In the following pages, you can learn about how the CoLab co-designed and piloted feminist common application and report forms together with a group of grantees—all women's funds,¹ what was learned from assessing the pilot, and opportunities to advance this collaboration going forward.

Feminist approaches to grant applications and reports matter because they integrate the commitments to co-creation, mutual accountability, and learning within routine processes. In doing so, they free women's funds to deepen their own focus and impact.

The intention behind this report is to share insights that will be useful to CoLab members and others interested in streamlining grantmaking practice. As a CoLab member expressed: the FCAR initiative should not be the ceiling but the floor, one part of a sea change in relationships between funders and grantees.

You are invited to join the broader community of funders taking practical steps to “walk our talk.” Our work to standardize and streamline application and reporting processes reflects our commitment to shifting power in philanthropy.

Gender Funders CoLab welcomes your comments, ideas, and feedback. We further invite you to share these lessons so that together we can accelerate the pace at which we remove barriers faced by organizations that do the vital work of feminist movement building.

¹ Women's funds are publicly supported entities that both raise and grant funds. They support feminist solutions to address the root causes of social injustice and resource efforts to realize the human rights of women, girls, gender non-binary, and transgender people.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

- 1. Common application and reporting forms SAVE TIME.** Women's funds using these forms spend less time on grant applications and reports. That time can be applied to work with feminist movements.
- 2. Common forms yield HIGHER-QUALITY proposals and reports.** Though they require less time, women's funds and donors both say that the common forms generate better, more useful information. The questions asked support reflection about strategies and context useful to women's funds. Donors say this higher-quality information helps them to make a stronger case for funding women's funds and feminist movements within their own institutions.
- 3. The PARTICIPATORY way in which the common forms were developed and the FEMINIST lens shaping the questions they include are critical to their success.** Women's funds save time when they can use a single form with multiple donors, but it's the relevancy and appropriateness of the questions in these particular forms that yield higher-quality, more relevant insights.

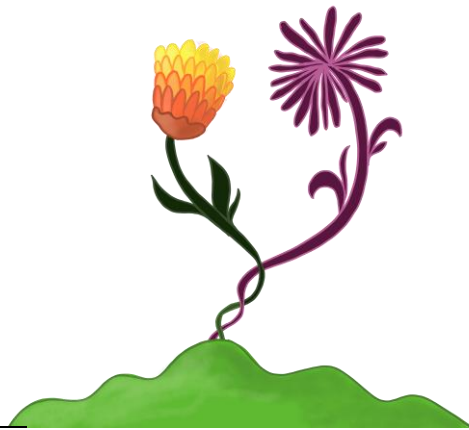
GRANT REPORTING IS BROKEN. CAN FEMINIST PHILANTHROPY FIX IT?

Application and reporting processes structure the exchange of information between funders and grantees. Yet, grantees describe these processes as tiresome, funder-determined, a waste of time and money, overly bureaucratic, and unhelpful. Meanwhile, grantmakers say they don't always read grant reports, and when they do read them, the information they contain isn't always useful.² Beyond these burdens, grantees view overly prescriptive grant applications or report forms as a manifestation of the unequal power dynamic inherent in the funder-grantee relationship.³ Rethinking and redesigning application and report forms are critical steps to supporting social justice activism of all kinds, including feminist movements and movement building.⁴

Acknowledging that current approaches to grant applications and reports have not served their field well, the Gender Funders CoLab (CoLab), a network of private foundations that collectively leverages over \$200 million annually to support gender justice organizing, set out to transform these approaches. The CoLab's starting point was the traditional funder-grantee relationship that its members have with women's funds.

Applying Feminist Values

The question that the CoLab asked itself was: "If grant applications and grant reporting are broken, yet embedded in and necessary to our work, how can we apply our feminist values to improve them?" In streamlining application and reporting processes, they hoped to create an easier and better way for women's funds to share work with funders. The CoLab was also motivated by a conviction that women's funds could spend less time reporting to donors and more time supporting social movements and feminist organizations. In short, common application and report forms, shared among funders, would reflect the CoLab's feminist values in four ways.

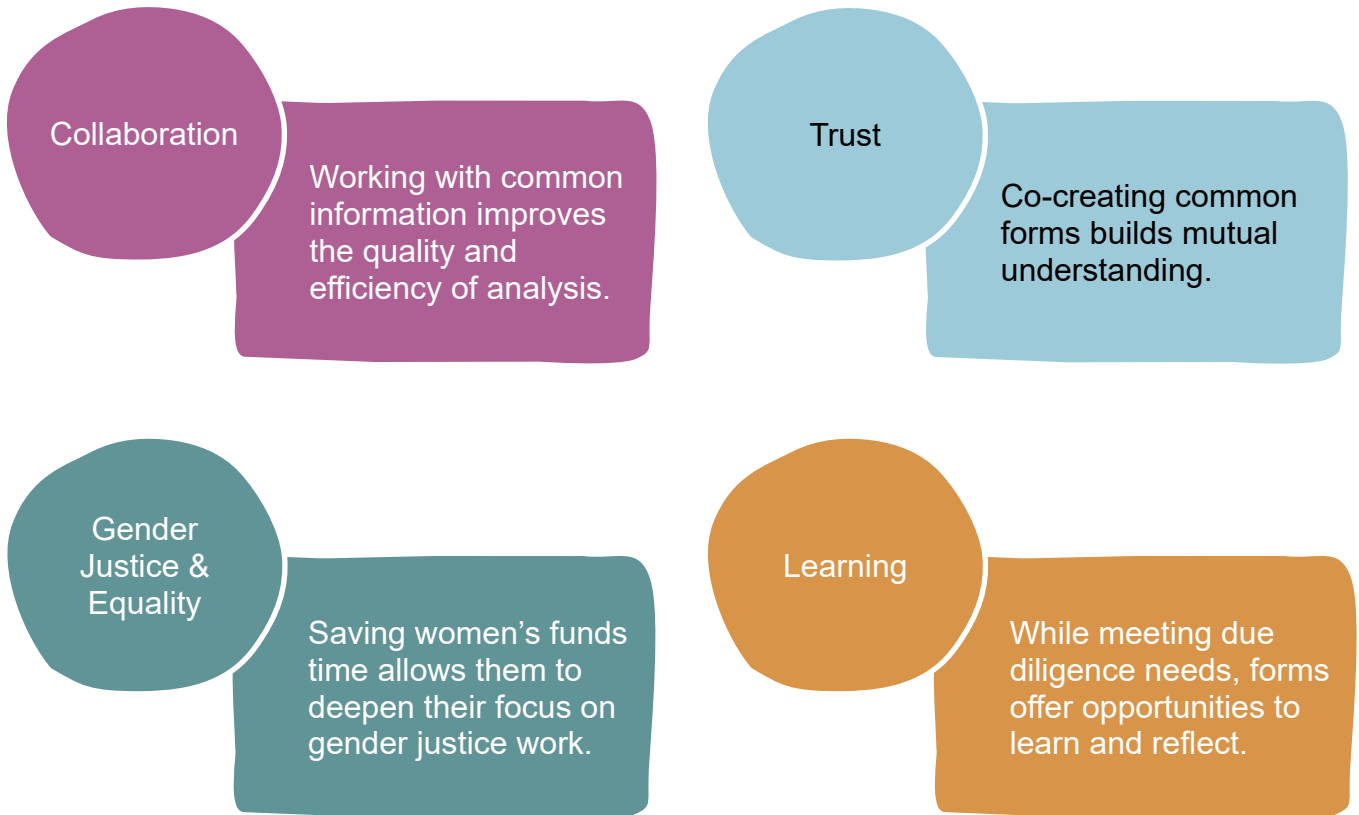


² For two pieces of research on the problems with grant reports, see *Listening for Change* (2017) commissioned by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Blgrave Trust, available at: <https://esmeefairbairn.org.uk/latest-news/listening-for-change/> and *Drowning in Paperwork, Distracted from Purpose: Challenges and Opportunities in Grant Application and Reporting* (2018) by Jessica Bearman, Bearman Consulting, available at: <https://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/drowninginpaperwork.pdf> As well as *Grant Reporting: The Current State of Practice* (2018), also by Jessica Bearman, available at: <https://www.peakgrantmaking.org/insights/grant-reporting-the-current-state-of-practice/>

³ For one call to action on this, see Galina Angarova and Daisee Francour's article *Indigenizing Philanthropy: Shifting Grantmaking Practices from Extractive to Reciprocal* (2020), which calls for decolonizing due diligence processes and is available at: <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/indigenizing-philanthropy-shifting-grantmaking-practices-extractive-reciprocal>

⁴ For a discussion of how redefining the donor-grantee relationship, including the application/reporting process is critical to gender justice, see *Applying a Feminist Lens to Grantmaking for Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls* (2021) produced by COFEM and available here: https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Guide-to-Grantmaking_19.10.21.pdf

Four Values of Gender Funders CoLab & How the Initiative Lived Them



A Participatory Initiative to Design Common Application & Report Forms

In 2017, the members of Gender Funders CoLab invited 150 current grantees to participate in a survey about their needs, priorities, and recommendations to funders. The survey generated 73 responses from 29 countries and yielded data on barriers to and possibilities for funding women's rights and feminist movements. The [resulting report](#) included strong recommendations for what grantmakers can do differently to better support this work.

One theme emerged as a clear priority: reducing the administrative burden of the grant application and reporting cycle. In response, the CoLab committed to creating and piloting common application and report forms to enable grantees of multiple CoLab members to prepare a single set of documents for multiple funders.

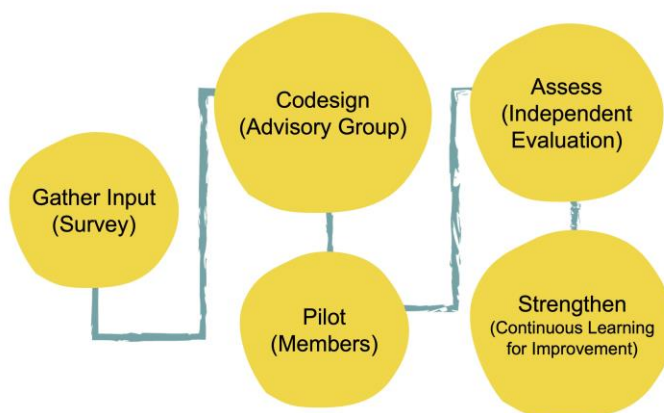
Importantly, the CoLab also committed to co-designing the forms in partnership with grantees through the formation of an advisory group of representatives from both women's funds and their funders.⁵ Their task was to generate forms that met funders' due diligence

⁵ The members of this group were: Cecilia Delaney, International Indigenous Women's Forum (FIMI); mónica enríquez-enríquez, Foundation for a Just Society; Katrin Wilde, Channel Foundation; Megan Selland, Wellspring Philanthropic Advisors; Rowena Nixon, Ford Foundation; Marion Duquesne, Mediterranean Women's Fund; Tariro Tandi, Urgent Action Fund-Africa; and Anisha Chugh, Women's Fund of Asia.

requirements, asked questions that women’s funds were interested in reflecting on, and were simple and easy to use.

After several rounds of drafting, gathering input, and revising, the CoLab was ready to launch the common forms in a pilot process. Eight CoLab members⁶ began offering the common application and report forms from 2020 to 2022. In 2022, this assessment was undertaken to explore the experience of using the forms and to make recommendations for continuous improvement of the processes.

Project Timeline: 2017–2022



LESSONS FROM THE INITIATIVE

Uptake and Use of the Forms

Using the forms poses relatively few challenges, but their real benefit is only realized when a grantee can use the forms with multiple funders.

Five current CoLab members (Channel Foundation, Foundation for a Just Society, Oak Foundation, Sigrid Rausing Trust, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund) reported using both the common application (CA) and the common report (CR). Additionally, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation will use the CA and CR in the future. Women’s funds also reported using the CA and CR with two foundations outside the CoLab community—the Overbrook Foundation and Fondation Chanel. One CoLab member is using the forms with an additional grantee (UHAI—the East Africa Sexual Health and Rights Initiative).

Thirteen women’s funds (50%) reported using either the CA or CR form, with another nine (35%) indicating they are unsure whether they have used the forms and four (15%) reporting they have not used either form. Women’s funds may feel uncertain about whether they have used the forms because funders do not necessarily identify the applications or report forms that they send to women’s funds as being the CA and CR (for instance, if the funder has integrated the CA and CR questions into their own grant management system).

“We’ve thought very deeply about what a good, private philanthropy partner to women’s funds can look like. Part of that is making the application and reporting process easier, so we’re an eager participant in this initiative.”

– COLAB MEMBER

⁶ The members who piloted the common application form and/or the common report form were the Channel Foundation, Foundation for a Just Society, Hewlett Foundation, NoVo Foundation, Oak Foundation, Open Society Foundation, Sigrid Rausing Trust, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

“I’m uncertain if I filled out the common application form. It hasn’t been made explicit to me from the funders that that’s what they were using.”

– WOMEN’S FUND

Reducing the Time Burden of Grant Applications and Reports

The forms save women’s funds time.

Of the 13 women’s funds that have used the forms, 11 (85%) reported that using the CA or CR **saved them time**. Time saved ranged from 2–70 hours; the mean was 20 hours, and the median was 10 hours.

The time saved obviously increases when a women’s fund can use the documents in reporting to more funders. Eight (62%) women’s funds that used the CA or CR used it with only one or two funders, limiting their potential time savings.

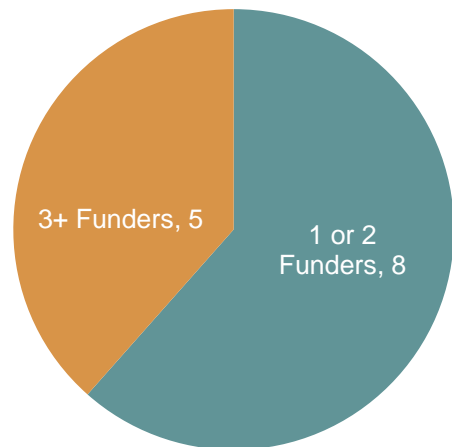
“It takes much less time than other [application and report] forms, which is, of course, really appreciated because there is already a lot of bureaucracy that we are dealing with.”

– WOMEN’S FUND

“If a Gates or a Ford, that fund more grantees than the rest of us combined, could get onboard then we could have the [time-saving] impact that we have hoped to have.”

– COLAB MEMBER

of CoLab Members That Women's Funds Report Using CA/CR Forms With



Adding Value for Grantees

The common report form adds value for women's funds.

Women's funds praise the CA/CR forms for being relatively straightforward and easy to use, for asking questions that focus on the total impact of their organizations rather than specific projects, and for allowing a storytelling approach to reporting. They like that the questions elicit reflections on how change happens and prompt them to think about their roles within feminist movements, not only as individual actors.

"It's very simple and very easy to use."

– WOMEN'S FUND

"The report really excels at prompting reflection."

– WOMEN'S FUND

For some, the process of using the CA/CR improves the overall quality of information they share. This is due to the nature and quality of the questions and to the iterative process of developing answers to questions that is supported by using the CA/CR forms with different funders. For example, receiving feedback from a funder on a CA or CR that has been submitted allows the women's fund to improve or expand its responses to the CA or CR before it is submitted to the next funder.

"[Before the common report form], all the funders were tracking very different things. There was no consensus and a million different indicators.

The common approach is a more focused approach to reporting and to applying that helps us be more efficient in analyzing and researching the situations [that we work on] and then envisioning what to do next."

– WOMEN'S FUND

"It [the common application] does take time, not only writing, but also thinking. But it's also useful in the sense that you can take the time to stop and think and the questions are good ones to think about. When we are working, we are just doing, doing, doing. ... I found that the questions weren't always easy, but it was useful to have some time to stop and think and reflect. The burden is proportional to the support."

– WOMEN'S FUND

That grantees find the forms valuable is due to the thoughtful and participatory process that informed the creation of the forms. Because women's funds themselves shaped the application and reporting questions, those questions are more relevant to their work. What makes a grant report question feel relevant? Women's funds described questions that prompted them to reflect on their contexts and their organizational processes for developing and assessing their strategies.



Adding Value for Funders

CoLab members report the forms yield responses that more than adequately answer the questions they have about the impact of their grants and the support women's funds are providing to feminist movements. They appreciate that the forms were co-created with women's funds and created with movement-building in mind. As a result, they feel the forms result in more useful or insightful responses.

“The common report form includes questions about collaboration, about networks, that we don't ask about in our regular form. These questions really illuminate the sophisticated role that women's funds play.”

– COLAB MEMBER

“The quality of information that we're getting back from the common report form is better and more meaningful than with standard reports.”

– COLAB MEMBER

They stress that getting more robust and meaningful information helps them to make the case within their institutions for supporting women's funds. They also appreciate that women's funds spend less time writing about their work and more time engaged in movement-building.

“By the time it comes to us, that common application might have already gone to Wellspring, to Oak, so the grantee, the women's fund, has already received feedback, they've worked on it. By the time I see it, it's much more solid, more robust ... and because the responses present a more robust case, I was in a better position to argue for a bigger increase in our grant budget for women's funds. To be specific, there was a women's fund I was giving a \$25,000 grant to. With the more robust information in their responses to the common application, I was able to build the case. Now, that grantee is receiving \$80,000.”

– COLAB MEMBER

Opportunities to Improve the CA/CR Forms

Both CoLab members and women's funds have ideas for strengthening the CA/CR forms and processes further. First and foremost, both constituencies are eager to see more funders use the forms.

Both CoLab members and women's funds recommend:

- Putting the forms online in a centrally accessible location so that members and women's funds alike can easily access them.
- Actively encouraging more funders to use the forms.
- Translating the forms into other languages (e.g., French, Portuguese, Spanish).
- Creating a common “renewal grant” application form (this would not need to collect all of the same information that the common application form does).

CoLab members are also interested in:

- Creating a “short version” of the common report that can be used as an interim report form or when only light reporting is needed.
- Creating a “conversation guide” version of the common report that can be used when

program officers offer oral reporting options to grantees.

Women's funds would also like to see:

- Funders take more responsibility for remembering to offer the CA/CR and/or reminding women's funds that they are available.

ADOPTING A COMMON APPLICATION AND COMMON REPORT FORM

Alliances or networks of funders who work in the same field can adopt common applications and common reporting forms. Doing so will save time and money for resource-strapped grantees. Beyond reducing administrative headaches, the use of common forms can reap the benefits of higher-quality reporting, but to achieve this, grantees must be involved in shaping the forms. Both the application and report questions and the process for completing them (e.g., through conversation or a written report) should be co-designed with the organizations that will use them to ensure that the questions posed lead to useful data and prompt thoughtful reflection.

Another advantage of a common set of reporting questions is that it creates the opportunity to shape a common understanding of the field, its priorities, and the strategies that are being used by different organizations within the broader social movement, field, or sector. This is an important benefit for funders who are looking for ways to improve their ability to analyze across organizations and contexts.

Top 3 Reasons to Use Co-Designed Common Applications/Reports

1. Save time and money.
2. Generate higher-quality reports and applications.
3. Add value to assessment processes by creating opportunities to “take a step back” and reflect.

Roadblocks to Using the Forms & How Funders Overcome Them

Adopting common application and reporting forms isn't without challenges. CoLab members reported some hurdles in getting their institutions on board with using the common forms. While some members initially worried that creating buy-in for the initiative would be the greatest challenge, ultimately, logistical challenges were the more frequently experienced roadblock to adopting the forms. These are primarily related to integrating the forms with existing online grants management systems.



Common Challenges and Solutions

CHALLENGE IN ADOPTING THE CA/CR	SOLUTIONS FOUND BY COLAB MEMBERS
Integration with grantmaking platforms (e.g., Fluxx, GivingData, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a custom template within the platform; directing women’s funds to write “see attachment” in the standard fields and then to upload the CA/CR as an attachment
Remembering to use the CA/CR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circulating a list of women’s funds throughout the foundation • Adding a “tag” to women’s funds’ records in the grantmaking system • Internal grantmaking team check-ins to review the implementation of the CA/CR
Trustees asking why they are not seeing certain information that came from the traditional application/report form, but is not in the CA/CR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive and ongoing communications with trustees and directors emphasizing how the CA/CR aligns with values and why it was adopted (e.g., adding a footnote to all reports to the Board, reminding them why the information about women’s funds’ grants looks different)
Loss of specificity in reporting (information on programs of interest)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realized they didn’t need as much specificity after all • Follow-up conversations or supplemental reporting on specific areas of the women’s funds’ work
Assuaging internal worries at the foundation about “compliance”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Naming the other funders that have adopted the common application helped internal decision-makers worry less • Making “minor edits” to the CA questions so it successfully “threads the needle” between compliance and flexibility and meets internal requirements • Using the foundation’s own financial report form alongside the narrative CR form as a compromise

MORE MEANINGFUL, LESS BURDENSOME REPORTING PROCESSES

One Step in a Journey to Transform Reporting

Conversations with CoLab members and women’s funds focused on their experiences using the common application and report forms but also touched on other changes that could shift how grantees report to funders.

From those conversations, we have identified several opportunities to implement practices to further streamline the application and (especially) reporting processes:

- **Standardize report periods with grantee input.** Some CoLab members wondered if it is possible to align grantmaking cycles to further streamline reporting for women’s funds, though they acknowledge potential logistical challenges, as many different factors drive individual foundations’ grantmaking timelines. An alternate option is to allow women’s funds to determine the time period that they report on. For example,

women's funds could report on their own most recently completed programmatic or fiscal year rather than on different grant periods for different funders.

From women's funds' perspective, this would also allow them to present their highest-quality data in the grant report, as they often align their own evaluation work to their program year. Frequently, they cannot use this data in their grant report because it does not match the funder's "report period," or they have to modify the data to match the "report period," which can diminish the quality of the data. In some cases, this is already practiced with financial reports (some funders ask for "most recently completed fiscal year" rather than financials tailored to the grant period) and could easily become a practice for narrative reporting as well.

"The common report isn't truly common unless the time periods you are reporting on are the same. Also, we put a lot of effort into our annual report; I would like to be able to reference or use that in the common report."

– WOMEN'S FUND

- **Explore the use of the common application and reporting forms with intermediary funders.** Women's funds are not only funded by private funders. In fact, a very important part of their funding comes through larger funds that have significant capacities to raise and move funding to feminist movements (for instance, Global Fund for Women, Equality Fund, and Mama Cash). Additionally, some private funders direct their funding for women's funds through regional intermediary funders (for instance, the TRAG Foundation in the Balkans) that have their own grantmaking processes. Collectively, these larger entities generate a significant number of applications and report forms for women's funds, and there may be ways to save additional time and resources if they are also using the common application and report forms. Global and regional intermediaries are also well-positioned to give helpful input on the forms as they evolve.
- In addition to offering the common forms as templates to other funders of women's funds, **create a common "question bank"** of the kinds of questions that are part of the forms. Some funders may not be able to adopt the full templates, but women's funds' time can still be saved if funders replace some of the questions they ask with the "common form" questions. In the assessment, women's funds noted how onerous it is to have similar but different versions of the same kinds of questions from different funders. Adopting shared wording on similar questions, even if a funder isn't ready to adopt the full form, would alleviate this.
- [Prospera, the International Network of Women's Funds](#), has a finger on the pulse of how women's funds are assessing their efforts and defining the impact they have and the ecosystem they are a part of. Several women's funds saw **opportunities for collaboration with Prospera** to ensure that the common report form aligns with ongoing efforts to develop common indicators or theories of change.
- Once a foundation has streamlined its own processes, it can **advocate within philanthropy** more broadly for practices that make grantees' work easier, better supported, and thus more likely to be successful. For example, a CoLab member suggests advocating for the removal of caps on "indirect costs" in proposal budgets or other pain points for grantees.

CONCLUSION

The members of the Gender Funders CoLab and the women's funds they support collaborated in this initiative to align funding practices with feminist values. Overall, feedback on the pilot initiative by which the CA/CR forms were designed and adopted is positive and supports their continued use. The common forms not only save women's funds time but the time they require is better spent as it yields richer responses.

If a women's fund can only use the CA/CR with one or two funders, they benefit far less than if they can use the forms with multiple funders. Bringing more funders on board is crucial to increasing time savings for women's funds. Women's funds also want greater clarity about when they can use, or are being offered, the CA/CR. Finally, giving women's funds more control over report content, by allowing them to report on their own fiscal or programmatic years instead of on the "grant period," would save additional time and contribute further to higher quality reporting.

Both CoLab members and women's funds see the CA/CR as an important step in a longer journey that could include additional ways of re-imagining and adapting traditional philanthropic tools and processes to align them better with feminist values.

"Let's ensure these forms can be continually dynamic and not held in amber but revisited and revised ... the forms are a floor, not a ceiling."

– COLAB MEMBER



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This assessment was guided by an advisory committee. We thank the following for their guidance:

Marion Duquesne, Mediterranean Women's Fund
mónica enríquez-enríquez, Foundation for a Just Society
Annie Hillar, Gender Funders CoLab
Betsy Hoody, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund
Chiara de Luca, Sigrid Rausing Trust

This assessment was implemented by, and this report was authored by, the following team from Informing Change:

Caitlin Stanton
Xiong Lee
Emily Medica

Illustrations & design by:

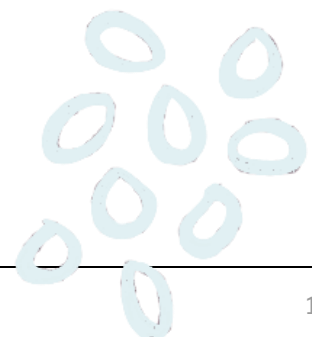
Claudia Lopez | On the Right Mind

With special thanks to:

Inti Chomsky, translation
Monica Tuazon, production

Representatives from the following organizations gave input via survey and/or interview to inform this assessment:

African Women's Development Fund
Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice
Bulgarian Fund for Women
Calala Women's Fund
Central American Women's Fund
The Channel Foundation
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation
Ecumenical Women's Initiative
Equality Fund
FemFund
Fondo Acción Urgente — Latin America
Fondo Alquimia
Fondo de Mujeres del Sur
Fondo Lunaria
Fondo Sociales/Elas
Foundation for a Just Society
FRIDA, the Young Feminist Fund
Global Fund for Women
International Indigenous Women's Forum (FIMI)
Mama Cash
Mediterranean Women's Fund
Numun
The Oak Foundation
Reconstruction Women's Fund



Semillas
The Sigrid Rausing Trust
Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights
Vida AfroLatina
Wellspring Philanthropic Fund
Women's Fund Asia
Women's Fund Fiji
Women's Fund in Georgia

APPENDIX

- a. The Gender Funders CoLab Common Application Form
- b. The Gender Funders CoLab Common Reporting Form



GENDER FUNDERS COLAB COMMON APPLICATION FOR WOMEN'S FUNDS

Part I: Organizational Context (1 page)

1. Describe the organization's mission, including a brief description of current programs.
2. When was your fund established?
3. How closely does your board and leadership staff reflect the demographics of the people, organizations, and movements you support through your grantmaking? If they do not match closely now, are you planning to align the demographic makeup of your board or leadership staff in the near future?
4. Do you ask your grantees if their leadership is representative of the communities they support? What have you learned from their practices?
5. Does your organization ensure that there is equity, diversity, and transition of leadership?

Part 2: Grantmaking (2–3 pages)

1. How many grants do you award annually (generally)?
2. What is the total amount of money you give in grants each year (on average)?
3. What is your average grant size (in USD)?
6. What is the geographic scope of your grantmaking?
7. Do you have a priority focus group (e.g., indigenous women, young women, etc.)?
8. Please describe your grantmaking approach and philosophy. (No more than 1 page).
9. What types of non-financial support do you provide to grantees?
10. How do you measure the impact of your grantmaking?

Part 3: Context, Partnerships, and Movement Building (2–3 pages)

1. In no more than 1 page, please describe the political, economic, and social context in which you work and how it directly affects your grantmaking and your grantees.
2. What element of your work are you most proud of and/or would like to share with your donors?
3. Please describe up to 3 key partnerships/collaborations you have.
4. Does your organization engage in cross-movement collaboration and/or funding? If so, please describe.

5. Does your organization work to influence the funding landscape? If so, please list the advocacy efforts/consortiums/etc. that you participate in.

Part 4: Funding + Budget (1 page)

1. What are the 2–3 key challenges you face for sustainable resource mobilization?
2. Please attach your current organizational budget.
3. Please also attach your audited financial statements for the last completed fiscal year. If audited financial statements for the last completed fiscal year are not available, please provide: (a) Internal, unaudited financial statements for the most recently completed fiscal year, including a statement of activities and statement of financial position; and (b) audited financial statements for the most recent fiscal year for which audited financial statements are available. If your fiscal year ended more than 9 months ago and you are unable to provide audited financial statements, or if your organization does not conduct an audit, please provide a written explanation.
4. Please list your top 5 donors, including the grant amount received in the below table.
5. What steps have you taken institutionally to support the sustainability of your organization?

NAME OF DONOR	AMOUNT RECEIVED	TIME PERIOD

Part 5: Request

1. How much funding are you requesting in USD for how many years?
2. Is this a core or project support grant? (If project, please briefly describe; no more than 200 words).



GENDER FUNDERS COLAB COMMON REPORT QUESTIONS FOR WOMEN'S FUNDS

No more than 5 pages

Describe the progress made during the grant period.

(This section can include context and achievements.)

Describe the grants made.

(This section should provide a brief summary of relevant grants made during the reporting period; no more than 1.5 pages total.)

Describe challenges.

(This section should describe any obstacles your organization faced and how you overcame or mitigated these challenges. We recognize that circumstances often change during the grant period, and we appreciate your candor in helping us address and learn from these issues.)

Describe lessons learned.

(This section should provide concrete examples of how this grant may influence your priorities or strategies in the future. What will you seek to replicate? What might it change? If applicable, describe how your strategy evolved during the reporting period.)

