

# Step Up, Step Back

REIMAGINING  
NON-COMPETITIVE  
GRANTMAKING IN  
COMMUNITY



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# ABOUT US

The Equality Fund is transforming the way that resources—and power—flow into the hands of women, girls, and trans people worldwide. Designed by feminists for feminists, we are a new model for sustainably resourcing feminist movements everywhere.

Through our grantmaking, the Equality Fund moves money and resources to women's rights organizations and feminist movements globally. We partner with organizations, coalitions, and networks leading feminist work and building power with women, girls, and trans people, especially in the Global South. As [feminist funders](#), we ground our work in mutual trust, respect, and collaboration.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

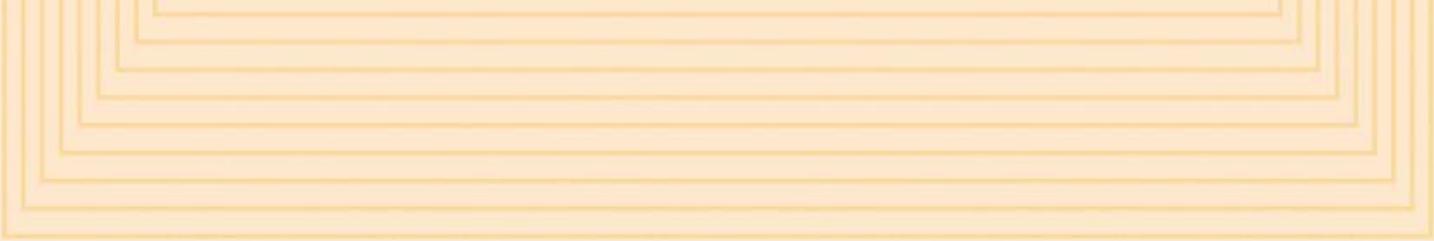
We would like to express our deep and sincere gratitude to the diverse group of feminist funds that engaged in the unique grantmaking process we are documenting in this learning report. Your willingness to come on this journey with us and your openness and ability to put community first have been invaluable.

We are particularly grateful to the funds that shared their thoughts and feedback with us through interviews and discussions. It is in the spirit of reciprocity, accountability, and mutual trust that we share our learning and hope that you see your voices reflected throughout these pages.

Finally, we would like to thank Katy Love, Ruby Johnson, and Devi Leiper O'Malley who advised and supported the Equality Fund team (including Fadekemi Akinfaderin, Wariri Muhungi, Marine-Celeste Kiromera, and Beatriz González Manchón) in the design, implementation, and documentation of this participatory process.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2021, the Equality Fund embarked on a journey to reimagine traditional competitive grantmaking models. The impetus was the design of a new funding program—*Activate*—which flows resources to feminist funds<sup>1</sup>, supporting their capacities to move money to their own networks of partners.

As a feminist fund, the Equality Fund considers itself a proud part of this diverse community. We are peers of different sizes and trajectories, working in different geographies, at multiple levels and collectively organizing in different configurations and networks, including [Prospera - International Network of Women's Funds](#) (Prospera). For the design of the *Activate* program, instead of replicating old grantmaking models rooted in scarcity and competition, we engaged with this vibrant community of peers to co-design a new approach. Together, we set out to build a non-competitive grantmaking model with feminist values of collaboration, solidarity, and community at the core. We called this model *Step Up/Step Back*.

During the process, the feminist funds successfully considered the community's resourcing needs and priorities as they decided whether to step up for funding or to step back and wait for future rounds. In the end, 23 funds stepped up to receive a total of \$14 million CAD in flexible multi-year grants, while close to 50 percent of eligible funds decided to step back.

This report uncovers the lessons behind this journey. It details the process and co-development of *Step Up/Step Back*, shares the experiences of the funds that participated, and discusses some of the points of tension that arose in the process.

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<sup>1</sup>The Equality Fund uses the term 'feminist funds' to refer to grantmaking organizations established to resource feminist and women's rights movements. Feminist funds provide financial grants and other types of support to grassroots groups, collectives, and individuals organizing to uphold and advance women's, girls', and trans people's rights. As public foundations, the primary mission of feminist funds is to raise a wide range of resources and direct these resources to movements. For the purpose of the *Activate* funding stream, funds that are a program of a larger entity, or that do not have independent decision-making power over their grantmaking and resource mobilization were not eligible.

# KEY LEARNINGS

## **A DIFFERENT WAY OF MAKING FUNDING DECISIONS IS POSSIBLE**

Nearly half of the eligible funds decided to step back from funding, after self assessing their position in the context of the broader community's resourcing needs and priorities.

## **WORKING WITH A TRUSTED INTERLOCUTOR IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS**

We greatly benefited from having a program lead that was a known and trusted member of the feminist funds community. The notion of voluntarily stepping back from funding may not have been met with as much openness without her deep ties and credibility in the community.

## **COLLECTIVE POWER IN DECISION-MAKING RESULTS IN OUTCOMES THAT ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF DIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY**

Taking a collective approach to deciding funding priorities ultimately led to a diversity of funds receiving resources, including 10 national funds and seven funds founded less than five years ago.

## **TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF RISK ARE OBSTACLES TO FEMINIST FUNDING**

In order to robustly fund new and/or under-resourced feminist movements working in restrictive socio-political contexts, we need to expand risk analysis frameworks and focus on understanding the risk of not being able to fund key feminist agents of change.

## **BUILDING ON EXISTING NETWORKS IS ESSENTIAL FOR TRUST AND COLLABORATION**

The *Step Up/Step Back* model was possible thanks to years of community-building work led by Prospera and others in the feminist funding ecosystem.

## **OWNERSHIP IS A PROCESS AND OUTCOME**

Engagement of the feminist funds community from the onset and throughout the participatory process reinforced solidarity amongst the funds.

## **PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF EXISTING FUNDING PARAMETERS IS KEY**

Our community continues to advocate for government funding that accommodates participatory grantmaking models and better meets the needs and realities of feminist movements globally.



# FROM COMPETITION TO COLLABORATION

In September 2020, the Equality Fund designed a new funding stream called [Catalyze](#). It moved money directly into the hands of women's rights organizations advancing critical feminist work around the world. With the design of [Catalyze](#) came an opportunity to reimagine how we work. One of our design team's commitments was to reduce the frustration that traditional funding models bring. Specifically, deep effort on the part of potential grantee partners in writing applications, for almost no chance of a return on the investment. We were driven by the question:

**How can we design a competitive funding process that better meets the needs of our grantee partner community?**



In response, we designed a two-step application process that successfully reduced the application burden for hundreds of candidates. Through our [Global Advisory Panel](#), which provided recommendations on which organizations to fund, we shifted decision-making power into the hands of feminist activists from each of our funding regions. And in the end, we had become partners with an incredible community of women, girls, and trans people tearing up old rulebooks, building collective power, demanding rights, and taking the future into their own hands.

With the [Catalyze](#) experience firmly rooted, our team shifted to design another new funding stream called [Activate](#). This stream focused on flowing resources to other feminist funds, supporting their capacities to move money to their own networks of partners. It was a daunting yet exciting prospect: supporting our peer community of feminist funds.

Again, the design team came together to dream of new possibilities. We were inspired by the innovative work spearheaded by many other feminist funds. We started to reimagine what this new [Activate](#) funding stream might be. And we realized that we needed to stretch ourselves to ask harder and more meaningful questions.

During the [Catalyze](#) experience, we asked: *How can we design a competitive funding process that better meets the needs of our grantee partner community?* But this question created self-imposed constraints. It started with the assumption that competitive funding models, as a first principle, are successful.

While we felt we had successfully reduced the administrative burden on applicants who participated in the *Catalyze* opportunity, we realized that for *Activate* we needed to ask different questions. These included:

**What are the costs of a competitive process when working in community?**

**Do funding processes have to be based on competition in order to be objective and transparent?**



**What would it look like to co-design a grantmaking stream rooted in our community’s shared feminist values?**

**How can we build participatory elements throughout the process as opposed to only at one point or at the very end?**

The result is *Step Up/Step Back*—an innovative experiment that turned the traditional competitive grantmaking model on its head. Instead of replicating old models rooted in scarcity and competition, and simply launching a call for proposals, we mapped existing feminist funds based and led from the Global South and East and/or doing a majority of their grantmaking in those regions. Starting with Prospera and expanding our mapping to the broader feminist funding ecosystem and human rights funder alliances, we identified 51 feminist funds and invited them into a consultation process to co-design a non-competitive grantmaking model rooted in solidarity and transparency.

In June 2021, feminist funds met to consider and jointly agree on resourcing needs and criteria for the *Activate* program. Based on those priorities and criteria, each fund decided whether to step up for funding or to step back and wait for future rounds. Notably, close to 50 percent of eligible funds decided to step back—an indicator that the process worked. The 23 funds that stepped up received a total \$14 million CAD in flexible multi-year grants.

In the following pages we unpack the *Activate* story: from the considerations that compelled us to shift our mindset, to the experiences of the feminist funds that participated, and the rich lessons we learned.



# METHODOLOGY

The design and implementation of the process and preparation of this learning report has been a collaborative undertaking between participatory grantmaking experts and the Equality Fund team. Three consultants, Katy Love, Ruby Johnson, and Devi Leiper O'Malley, advised and supported Equality Fund grantmaking team members Fadekemi Akinfaderin, Wariri Muhungi, Marine-Celeste Kiromera, and Beatriz González Manchón in all steps of *Activate's* participatory process. This core team's scope of work covered all key aspects of the stream's launch including: the design of the guiding principles and values of the initiative, facilitation of the community consultations with the feminist funds, and the documentation and evaluative work that formed the key inputs for this report.

The team of consultants led, in particular, the collection of reflections from the feminist funds that participated. They documented highlights along the way, and, at the end of the process, conducted 12 confidential one-on-one interviews, with six funds that stepped up for funding and six funds that stepped back. The objective of the interviews was to better understand the experiences of the funds that participated, including what informed their decision-making; surface any points of tension; and collect overall feedback and recommendations. Based on the results of these interviews, the consultants aggregated emerging themes, insights, and recommendations and shared them with the Equality Fund team without attribution to the particular funds. The team then went through a sensemaking exercise to review, discuss, and identify key lessons learned from the initial findings. This report has been compiled by the Equality Fund team incorporating the full set of findings and lessons learned that emerged from the series of interviews, as well as from the various discussions that Equality Fund staff had with the feminist funds throughout the process.



# OUR MODEL: COOPERATION AND COMMUNITY FIRST

The Equality Fund is part of a rich ecosystem of feminist funds and has benefited from learning from several of our sister funds, including FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund, the Central American Women's Fund, Mama Cash, and others who have experimented with and embraced models of participatory grantmaking over time. We are a member of [Prospera - International Network of Women's Funds](#) and have been an active participant in [an innovative collaboration](#) bringing together private foundations and Prospera in an ambitious grantmaking initiative committed to participatory governance and grantmaking approaches.

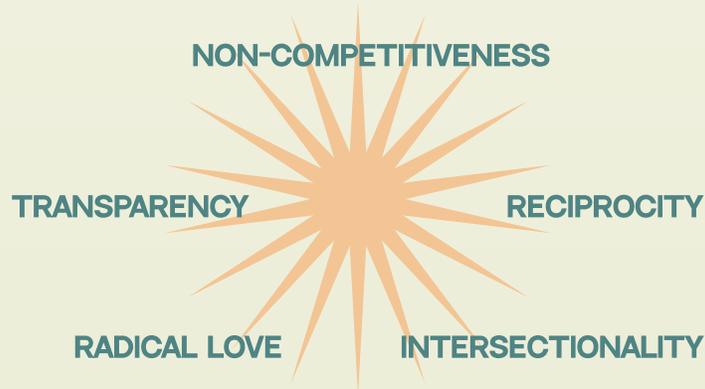
In designing *Activate*, the team grounded itself in those experiences across the community and took into account important contextual factors, in particular the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on women's rights and feminist organizations around the world. Over two years into the pandemic, many were losing funding for their critical work, adjusting strategies and activities, and addressing widening inequalities that disproportionately impacted women along racial, socio-economic, sexual orientation, age, and other identities.

All these considerations compelled us to reimagine a new model of participation—one that centred our community of sister funds and our shared feminist values of collaboration and community. We called it *Step Up/Step Back*, a model inspired by [Indigenous-led](#) and solidarity movements that promote community-based thinking rather than competition.

To learn more about the *Step Up/Step Back* approach, see our graphic on the next page.

# Principles of the *Step Up/Step Back* Model

Drawing on existing models of solidarity movements, we designed a process based on the following principles:



## Stages of the *Step Up/Step Back* Model

①

Through community discussion, the funds agree on grant criteria and a set of priorities.



②

Each fund determines whether they fit the criteria and whether they felt they need the grant in comparison to their fellow funds. Funds can determine their decision to pursue the grant through conversations with each other.



The funds that decide not to apply **STEP BACK**.



The funds that decide to apply **STEP UP**.

### SCENARIO A:

If there are enough funds for all who Stepped Up, everyone gets a grant.

### SCENARIO B:

If there are not enough funds for everyone who Stepped Up, then a community prioritization takes place through a guided selection process.

The *Step Up/Step Back* model lends itself well to the dynamic community of feminist funds we described at the beginning of this report. As we mapped existing feminist funds, particularly those based in and led by activists in the Global South and East, the reality is that the majority already belong to Prospera and have benefited from years of exchange and community-building with one another. As for the funds that are not members of the network, there are other key spaces and alliances they participate in, such as [Human Rights Funders Network](#), [Edge Funders Alliance](#), [Global Philanthropy Project](#) or [Ariadne](#). These are communities that convene and advance dialogue and collaboration among peer funders that have shared values, strong relationships, and deep accountability to human rights and feminist movements. These experiences of community, and the Equality Fund's active participation in it as a peer and collaborator, were all key enabling factors in the implementation of the *Step Up/Step Back* model.

A key feature of the process (as illustrated in the *Step Up/Step Back* graphic), was the co-design and participation of the feminist funds throughout. As a first step, the Equality Fund team reached out to the 51 funds identified in the mapping and convened a discussion with the community on how best to allocate resources for the first round of *Activate*.

Forty representatives from different funds, colleagues from the Prospera Secretariat, and seven Equality Fund staff participated in the session and discussed scenarios for allocating the funding. These included options like solely considering funds' budget sizes and prioritizing those below a certain threshold, or, taking a more thematic approach and focusing on funds working in political crises and restrictive contexts for civil society. Ultimately, the community collectively agreed that the first round of *Activate* should focus on:

- Feminist funds working in contexts of civil unrest, state-sponsored violence, emergencies, and crisis.

- Feminist funds with strategic opportunities that facilitate new partnerships and unlock additional resources to support the ecosystem.

The specific eligibility criteria were then developed by our team building on the community agreements which were operationalized to prioritize funds:

- Based in the Global South or East that have been operating for less than five years<sup>2</sup>.

- Working and grounded at national levels.

- Operating under financial constraints or limitations.

- Working with feminist and women's rights organizations and movements that are experiencing state-sponsored rights violations and crackdowns, or that are under-served, under-resourced, and hard to reach due to political and social factors.

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<sup>2</sup>The only limitation the Equality Fund had from the outset was due to the fact that the Development Assistance funding we have from the Government of Canada is scoped to supporting organizations/funds/networks based and/or doing a majority of their grantmaking in Official Development Assistance (ODA) eligible countries.

The criteria were not mutually exclusive and feminist funds were not expected to meet all of the specific criteria to be eligible for funding. The expectation was for funds to use these specific criteria in assessing and deciding whether they would step up in this round or step back and wait for future rounds of support.

The objective of the *Step Up/Step Back* model was for funds to weigh these considerations not only as they related to their own organization, but in the context of ecosystem needs and priorities, self-assessing their positioning in relation to others in the community.

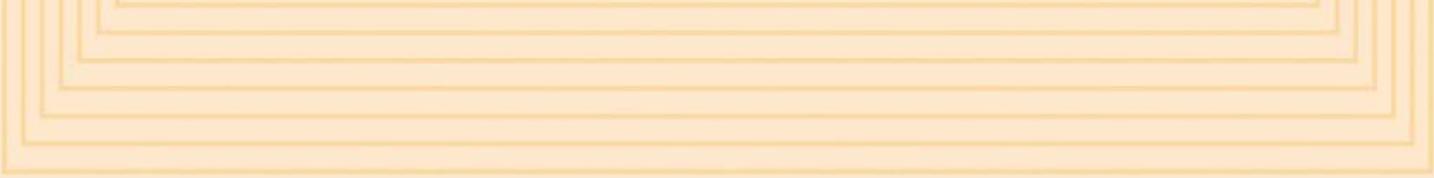
Of the 44 eligible funds in the ecosystem, 21 chose to step back and not submit an application. Many of these funds shared with us that—in the spirit of solidarity—they were prioritizing other sister funds that needed more financial support at this moment in time, and would consider applying for future rounds of funding. As noted by one fund:

**We felt that where we are now financially we are okay. We do not have a major pressing need like other sister funds. Of course no one ever has enough money because the needs in the movement are a lot, but we are okay not going in this round. Let the newer funds have a chance.**



In the end, all 23 funds that stepped up received funding after completion of the due diligence process (see Scenario A in the *Step Up/Step Back* graphic). Each of the funds received grants of between \$200,000-330,000 CAD per year. *It is important to note that the process did not result in funds receiving less money.* Had we not had enough resources to provide the planned grant sizes to all funds that stepped up, the process would have moved to a community prioritization exercise (see Scenario B in the *Step Up/Step Back* graphic), where the funds themselves would have decided, through a guided selection process, who should ultimately be allocated funding.

The following sections explore in more detail how the decision making process evolved inside the various funds, what influenced their decisions to ultimately step up or not, as well as the findings and lessons learned from the process.



# EXPERIENCES OF THE FUNDS: DECISION-MAKING WITH AN ECOSYSTEM LENS

As part of our learning, the team of consultants that accompanied the Equality Fund’s design team conducted 12 interviews with feminist funds that participated in the process. This included six funds that stepped up for funding and six funds that stepped back. The objective of the interviews was to better understand the experiences of the funds that participated, including what informed their decision-making throughout the process, surface any points of tension, and collect overall feedback and recommendations. Based on the results of these interviews, the consultants compiled emerging themes and recommendations and shared them with the Equality Fund team (all direct quotes from the interviews were anonymized before being shared with the Equality Fund). This section summarizes insights that emerged from these interviews as well as from discussions that Equality Fund staff had with the funds throughout the process.

Most feminist funds interested in this opportunity consulted with internal stakeholders inside their organizations when deciding whether or not to pursue this funding. Interestingly, many of the funds also met and discussed the funding opportunity with other feminist funds in the ecosystem, often in their region, before making a final decision. A number of funds noted that the *Step Up/Step Back* approach was important in giving them the space to take an ecosystem lens when deciding whether or not to apply for funding: “[This] allowed us to pause for a moment and reflect on whether we actually need the resources—what for, and if there is anyone else who needs it more.”

This sentiment was shared by another fund who spoke to how the approach facilitated funds centering community needs during their individual deliberations:

**[This step enabled us to] show the level of maturity of women’s funds to be able to be honest about our needs. The attitude of who needs it most should get it. [It] centers not just our institutional needs but collective needs.**





## DECIDING TO STEP UP

The feminist funds that stepped forward did so in large part because their organization needed the funding and they felt the movements they support would benefit from these resources. However, one fund noted the tension they felt while deliberating between their responsibilities to the movements they serve and their community of sister funds: “Our movements are so strong, there’s so much richness, and organizations are putting bodies on the line. I would not have felt in a position to say no [and not apply]. Of course, after presenting the letter of interest, [if] the Equality Fund comes and says there’s a sister fund who needs it [more], then of course we would say yes to that.”

Additionally, some funds noted their particular interest in receiving funds from the Equality Fund, since it is a known and trusted partner in the ecosystem. One fund went further to articulate their interest in receiving funding from the Government of Canada through the Equality Fund, citing in particular that

**behind the fund there’s a progressive government giving the money, and we see this as a big opportunity.**



A few funds were initially ambivalent, at first planning to step back but ultimately stepping forward due to changes in their financial situation during this volatile period or due to uncertainty around when the Equality Fund’s next round of funding would take place. One fund shared that during the application period, funding that they had been counting on fell through, which pushed them to apply. Another fund noted that although they didn’t originally intend to step forward, thinking other funds might have “needed it more,” uncertainty about the timing of future rounds of funding ultimately made them step up.



## DECIDING TO STEP BACK

Almost half of the eligible funds stepped back for this round of *Activate*, taking several factors into consideration in this decision. Many considered their own solid financial situation, others chose not to apply due to limited internal capacity to manage the process. But, most commonly, what came through in the interviews was the feminist solidarity at play.

Several funds connected their decision to step back with the needs of others in the ecosystem. A number of funds explicitly mentioned wanting to ensure that grants for this round of *Activate* went to newer and emerging funds that needed it most. There was a strong desire amongst many funds to see grants go to newer and national funds in particular. Some stressed the importance of wanting other funds who had historically had less access to funding to step up.

One fund stated that their “main reason [to step back] was that we did not want to take away money from the local women’s funds that have much smaller budgets.” Another fund stepped back because they had already received funding from the same bilateral funder (Government of Canada). For them, this was an issue of fairness and wanting to ensure that other feminist funds were also able to receive resources from Canada. During a call with Equality Fund staff they stated,

**our Fund is going to step down from this process. We are already receiving funding from [the Government of Canada] under the Women’s Voice and Leadership program. It is a thing of solidarity and we know there will be other opportunities, so it is best to give others a chance now.**



These decisions were not always straightforward or easy. Many funds felt an urgent need to secure funding in challenging times, but their solidarity and sense of co-responsibility towards other less resourced funds held more weight. This reflects an ownership of the collective priorities set by the community during the consultation process, in particular the joint agreement to ensure that funding for the first round of *Activate* reached emergent and national funds. The fact that funds weighed this so heavily during their individual deliberation processes is evidence of their deep sense of accountability to the community and the collective process.

Other factors such as timing, capacity, and compliance requirements also influenced funds' decision to step back. Funds carefully considered the implications of some of the Equality Fund grant requirements, which had been shared by the team at the start of the process. Many funds also thoughtfully considered their own bandwidth at the time of the application and—due to organizational transitions, limited staff capacity, or other pressing priorities—decided to step back for this round. A few funds also cited the next funding call as a better time for their organization to step up.



# POINTS OF TENSION

Given that this was a new approach for both the Equality Fund and the community, there were also, unsurprisingly, a few points of tension in the process. Most of these concerns were surfaced by sister funds during the interviews with the consultants. Many centered around *Activate's* compliance requirements and areas where the Equality Fund could have provided more clarity to support funds' decision-making process. Below is a deeper dive into these concerns and notes from the Equality Fund about a way forward.

## **FUNDS WERE CONCERNED, AND IN SOME CASES OPTED OUT, BECAUSE OF BURDENSOME REQUIREMENTS.**

Some funds decided not to apply for funding after reviewing the due diligence, reporting, and compliance requirements. They shared with interviewers their concerns about cumbersome and restrictive conditions, particularly those that would be passed down to their grantee partners. One of the funds that already had experience with a similar bilateral donor decided not to pursue this opportunity based on that experience.

### **WAY FORWARD:**

We believe that it is important to continue to advocate and negotiate for more and better funding, yet recognize that terms and conditions are restrictive and prohibitive. Finding the right balance between compliance requirements of government funding and reducing the compliance and reporting burdens of our partners is an ongoing challenge that we continue to work on (see more details in Key Learnings section). We will continue to use our role and position, leveraging our collaboration with sister funds, to advocate to donors for less restrictive requirements.

## **SOME FUNDS FELT A TENSION BETWEEN HAVING TO BALANCE URGENT INDIVIDUAL OR REGIONAL NEEDS WITH THOSE OF THE ENTIRE GROUP OF PARTICIPATING FUNDS FROM ACROSS THE WORLD.**

This was the case for some of the larger regional funds, as they were forced to balance an urgent need for resources due to challenging political contexts, with the reality that other funds with smaller budgets perhaps needed resources even more urgently. In one case, two regional funds choosing to step back ultimately led to one region – Central America – not being funded.

### **WAY FORWARD:**

While the Equality Fund team sat in discomfort at this outcome, it felt important to fully honor the process of collective power in decision-making and results. In future rounds, we may consider creating more space for exchange after funds have stepped forward, to ensure more well rounded discussions on needs for resources across the ecosystem.

## **ONE FUND THAT HAD INITIALLY PLANNED TO STEP FORWARD ENDED UP DECIDING TO STEP BACK FOLLOWING A DISCUSSION WITH EQUALITY FUND STAFF.**

During the meeting, the Equality Fund team and the fund reviewed *Activate* funding priorities and the team pointed out the fund's location in the Global North. The discussion was taken well by the fund due to the previous positive relationship they had with the Equality staff member. However, in the follow-up interview, it became clear that the fund had perceived the exchange on their geographical location as a signal of Equality Fund's preference that they step back. Upon reflection they shared that "we didn't feel like we had space to disagree, but we understood the reason."

### **WAY FORWARD:**

The Equality Fund will continue working on better ways to communicate to ensure funds know and feel that they have the final decision making power on whether or not to step up. We also continue to think about and monitor how power shows up in these kinds of processes and interactions and how best to address it.



# KEY LEARNINGS

Following the implementation of the *Step Up/Step Back* model, the Equality Fund design team and the consultants organized a series of discussions to reflect on the process and identify key lessons learned. This included a sensemaking exercise in which key insights and recommendations from the 12 feminist fund interviews were reviewed and discussed, as well as the Equality Fund staff's own reflections of how the process unfolded. The following section provides an overview of the key learnings generated through these discussions.

## **BUILDING ON EXISTING NETWORKS IS ESSENTIAL FOR TRUST AND COLLABORATION**

**This Step Up/Step Back model was only possible thanks to years of community-building work led by many others in the feminist funding ecosystem.**

*Activate's* non-competitive model benefited from the foundational community-building work driven by women's funds over decades. Without this established community and its networks, the process may not have succeeded nor yielded additional transformational impact.

For example, the process enabled feminist funds to feel involved in not just the grantmaking process, but in the larger push to do things differently in the field of philanthropy. As one fund remarked: "[Equality Fund's grantmaking] has a lot of potential given the government and other partners' involvement. It has a lot of impact on the whole spectrum. We were excited to do our own fair share and contribution to take part—with the listening, suggestions, and flexibility."

For funders contemplating adopting or experimenting with a *Step Up/Step Back* model, it is important to note that time and resources need to be invested in relationship building, convenings, facilitation, and community engagement. Existing networks are often a good place to start building, in collaboration with network coordinators.

It may require additional time for funders to build trust and presence within and from these networks as well. For the Equality Fund, being a peer in the community of feminist funds was a key enabling factor. We also consulted with existing networks such as Prospera throughout the process for input and advice.

## **WORKING WITH A TRUSTED INTERLOCUTOR IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS**

Having a program lead that is known and trusted by the feminist funds was important in creating a process that felt open and trustworthy to the community.

It cannot be highlighted enough the extent to which we benefited from having staff members who were already trusted community members. Without them, the proposition of a process of stepping back from funding may have been met with less openness. Many of the funds who were interviewed by the consultant team highlighted that the program lead at the Equality Fund, Fadekemi Akinfaderin, was known to them and trusted. Many felt the Equality Fund had offered sufficient guidance to them as they deliberated on whether or not to step up, and that the team lead had been particularly helpful in answering questions throughout the process.

Because of these conditions, we were pleased to hear that this model had reduced stress in the application process, moving us towards solidarity and trust. One fund told us:

**This was not an anxiety orienting process. That's not something you can say for all application processes. What I appreciated, personally, is how accessible and open the team was, if we had any doubts they always made sure we could reach out to them.**





## OWNERSHIP IS A PROCESS AND AN OUTCOME

**Engagement of the feminist funds community throughout the participatory process reinforced solidarity amongst the funds.**

The Equality Fund's initial consultation with the community brought multiple stakeholders together, including eligible funds, representatives from the Prospera secretariat as well as Equality Fund staff and leadership. These consultations successfully created a space to build a shared understanding of the process, ensure everyone had the same information around resourcing gaps in the community, and foster solidarity amongst the funds.

On their own initiative, several funds convened or participated in successive regional conversations to discuss *Activate's* funding opportunity, while going through their own decision-making processes. This demonstrates the extent to which funds were building on existing trust and relationships and considering wider ecosystem needs during their individual deliberations. In these subsequent self-led discussions, the participating funds shared information, improved their understanding of each other's reasoning for stepping forward or stepping back, and strategized together on the implications of those decisions. For example, one fund shared: "Thanks to the meetings and network conversation, we realized that the larger big funds from European countries were stepping back. It gave us, as a smaller [national] fund, [the chance] to take a spot and work from there. It gave us a better chance to avoid any competition with them."

Meanwhile, another group of funds discussed together the implications if certain funds stepped back and the potential scenario of an entire geographic region being left out of receiving resources. In future rounds, Equality Fund teams can continue to work closely with networks like Prospera to co-create even more targeted, intentional spaces to facilitate these conversations with ease for participants.

Ultimately, the community process unfolded in curated as well as more informal conversations that encouraged funds to consider the priorities and needs of their peers—in addition to their own—in their decision-making.

## **COLLECTIVE POWER IN DECISION-MAKING RESULTS IN OUTCOMES THAT ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF DIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY**

Taking a collective approach to deciding funding priorities resulted in a diversity of funds receiving resources, including those that face particular challenges in accessing funding.

The outcome is a cohort of organizations that mirrors the diversity of the ecosystem, and reflects the intersectional visions of feminist funds themselves:

**FIVE** funds are self-led by and work exclusively with particularly marginalized communities such as sex workers, LGBTQI+ communities, adolescent and young women, Indigenous women, and afro-descendant women in Latin America to advance their specific agendas.

**TEN** funds are supporting movements at national, sub-national, and community levels within particular countries, including: Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil, Nepal, Democratic Republic of Congo, Serbia, and Armenia. These funds play unique roles in their context, and have in-depth local knowledge and connections to movements, but have historically had less access to resources.

**ONE** thematic fund works at the intersection of feminist technology and philanthropy, prioritizing communities that have limited access to digital technologies and experience surveillance and intimidation in digital spaces.

**SEVEN** funds were founded less than five years ago and are growing their grantmaking and developing their own organizational capacity and structures.

**TWO** Urgent Action sister funds play critical roles in Africa as well as Asia and the Pacific by supporting women human rights defenders and activists working in crisis contexts who are facing harassment for their work and responding to time-sensitive moments and strategic opportunities.

**SEVENTEEN** funds are members of Prospera, where we work together as peers to drive change for women, girls, trans people, and their communities.

As one fund remarked, “I think there was a nice variety of funds, I saw quite a lot of national funds [rather than global], which is positive.” This is noteworthy given that larger global funds or regional funds in the community typically have more access and receive significantly more funding than national funds.

## **PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF EXISTING FUNDING PARAMETERS IS KEY**

**More flexible and less onerous requirements and conditions by governments' international assistance programs would facilitate the development of participatory grantmaking practices.**

An ongoing challenge for the Equality Fund, and our community of feminist funds, is how to best balance the terms and conditions of government funding with the realities and lived experiences of the movements we serve.

In feminist funding spaces, we are constantly engaging with questions like: how can we create relationships based on trust and solidarity with partners, and not reinforce traditional power dynamics? How can we foster a culture of mutual accountability and solidarity, while not passing along tremendously burdensome requirements? This conversation continues in our organization and also with sister funds more broadly.

A particular challenge is that international assistance funds can only be directed to organizations in countries on the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee's list of Overseas Development Assistance recipient countries. This list does not include a number of countries where feminist funds are located and/or work. Given our primary funding base, funds working in these countries were not eligible for *Activate*, despite gender inequality and violence in those countries and the compelling work they are doing. Examples include Poland, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Chile.

While the feminist funds community understands that this is beyond our ability to directly change, it is still an inherent obstacle in the pursuit of decolonizing aid and philanthropy. Furthermore, it is at odds with the fact that struggles for women's rights and gender equality are based on local realities and don't mirror gross domestic product (GDP) and other economic growth indicators as they develop. There is scope for continued joint advocacy here.



Additionally, because government funding has high compliance and accountability demands, this results in burdensome requirements for grant recipients which can often act as a barrier to certain organizations accessing this type of funding. Most feminist funds have mature grantmaking systems and well established due diligence and accountability processes that meet the terms and conditions of bilateral funders. It is also true, as noted above, that some funds chose to step back because they felt reporting requirements were too cumbersome and restrictive, particularly on their grantee partners. For example, keeping receipts and supporting documents for a period of six years after a grant has closed (which is a requirement of the Canada Revenue Agency and one we must follow) is a challenge for many grassroots organizations and feminist collectives. The Equality Fund team is working together with feminist funds to address their concerns while staying compliant as we move into the implementation phase of the grants.

The feminist funds community has expressed a desire to work in collaboration with the Equality Fund to advocate for better alignment of government funding practices with the needs of feminist movements globally. We will continue to work with this community and other stakeholders to advocate for more and better funding to the movements we serve.

## **TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF RISK ARE OBSTACLES TO FEMINIST FUNDING**

**We must challenge traditional notions of risk in grantmaking in order to robustly fund new and/or under-resourced feminist movements working in restrictive socio-political contexts.**

How institutional funders assess risk is often a major barrier to supporting feminist organizations who may not have the required systems that are perceived as necessary to minimize risk. The Equality Fund takes opportunities to expand risk analysis frameworks in ways that shift traditional assumptions. This includes challenging others to understand the risk of not supporting the groups, like feminist funds, that are closest to the communities most affected by gender inequalities and injustice.

All funds emerge in response to a need. This is especially the case in restrictive socio-political and economic contexts, where feminist funds play a crucial role in resourcing women's rights and feminist organizations on the front lines of resistance and change. The Equality Fund team worked hard to resist traditional notions of risk, knowing that this was fundamental to ensuring that feminist funds working in contexts of civil unrest, state-sponsored violence, emergencies, and crisis, as well as emerging and national funds, were not left out of the process.

In particular, our support of emerging funds who were newer to grantmaking and managing larger grants challenged us to interrogate prevalent notions of risk. We engaged in rich internal conversations, developed case studies, and considered risk across the entire portfolio, instead of at the level of each individual organization. This approach was borrowed from the investment world, where risk is positive and welcome, as it is seen as necessary to achieve better returns.

We also challenged ourselves on the question of grant sizes. Historically, the funds with bigger budgets in our community have received larger grants, while funds with smaller budgets, or newer funds, have received smaller grants. This has reinforced disparities between funds and made it harder for those with smaller budgets—often national funds—to firmly root their institutional systems and plan for growth. By providing similar grant sizes to all of the funds that stepped up (all grants ranged between \$200,000-330,000 CAD per year), the Equality Fund recognized that a significant investment was needed in each one of the funds to ensure they could respond to needs of their constituencies and recover core costs. While the majority of the grant was for on-granting to feminist organizations, we recognized the need for emergent and less resourced funds to allocate a greater percentage of the resources to institutional strengthening.



# CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The co-design of the *Step Up/Step Back* model with so many feminist funds has been a transformative learning journey. It revealed the power of community, collective decision-making, and what is possible when we place our feminist values at the heart of a design process.

By convening the feminist funds from the very start of the process to agree on funding priorities, we ensured that we created eligibility criteria that responded to ecosystem resourcing gaps and needs, identified by the community. This approach created a strong sense of solidarity amongst the funds and allowed them to self-assess their own needs in relation to others. In the end, a rich and diverse group of 23 feminist funds stepped up for funding, including seven emerging funds and ten national funds—two groups that have historically had less access to funding. We look forward to supporting and deepening our partnerships with each of these funds as they continue to move resources to hundreds of local women’s right and feminist organizations holding the line against rising threats to women, girls, and trans people around the world.

Throughout this process, Equality Fund staff have also learned to get comfortable with being uncomfortable: questioning long-held assumptions of traditional grantmaking processes and stretching to reimagine new and different approaches. We have had to acknowledge and grapple with the challenges that come from the requirements and regulations associated with public funding. We have also had to manage uncertainty and challenge understandings of risk. More importantly, we continue to reflect and hold meaningfully the stark cost if we do not get funding to feminist movements that do the hard work of resisting, reforming, reimagining, and recreating our world. These processes of unlearning and relearning are part of our commitment to feminist philanthropy and deepening our solidarity with feminist movements. And we have much more work ahead. We are deeply grateful to all of the feminist funds and Prospera for contributing their time, talent, and wisdom to shape this process and ensure its success.



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