



WOMENSTRONG
INTERNATIONAL

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

WomenStrong's Approach to Knowledge and Learning

This fact sheet describes WomenStrong International's approach to knowledge and learning, both as it relates to our own model and to the work of our 19 partner organizations seeking to prevent violence and advance the education, health, and wellbeing of urban women and girls in 16 countries. It includes how we have adapted our approach to respond to partners' current COVID-19 pandemic-related challenges, while continuing to enable learning about effective and ineffective strategies and practices.

WomenStrong's partners receive grants to implement projects in their communities; participate in a WomenStrong Learning Lab where they can share with, learn from, and form relationships with their peers; and receive technical assistance that is responsive to their needs. Through our collective learning and sharing, WomenStrong seeks to build a global community of organizations better equipped to further the rights and wellbeing of women and girls.

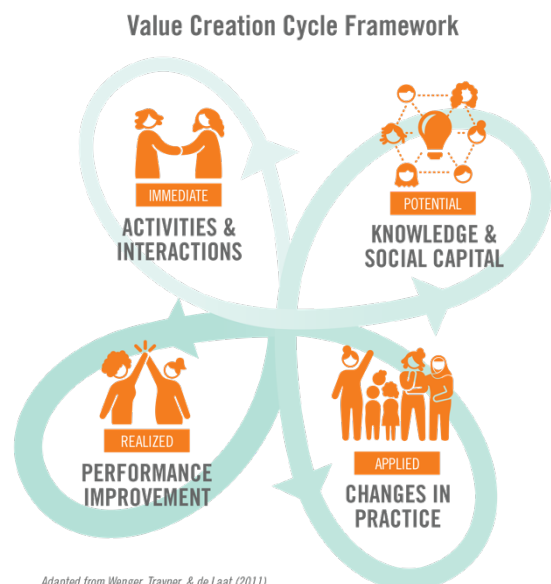
Our hypothesis, according to WomenStrong's theory of change, is that when like-minded women-focused organizations come together to share with each other what works and what doesn't, are given support to improve their organizational and technical capacity, and have opportunities to amplify their learnings with a wider community of organizations, they will improve their own practice and that of others. By amplifying best practices that help women and girls thrive, we seek to expand the knowledge base of other practitioners, as well as governments, multilateral agencies, and funders.

Please note that WomenStrong uses "Knowledge and Learning" to describe our approach to monitoring and evaluation. This emphasizes our focus on continuous learning, rather than on partner compliance to a rigid set of indicators. It also accounts for trust in our community-based partners' ability to implement and track programs in ways that are most suitable for them, and to ensure our capacity-strengthening opportunities for partners are not one-size-fits-all, but rather are tailored to their needs and interests.

Measuring the Learning Lab's Value

Within our Knowledge and Learning program, WomenStrong evaluates the Learning Lab model to ensure we are making progress according to our theory of change and to continuously improve our internal practices in order to achieve our objectives. This includes determining whether activities designed to support peer learning, capacity-strengthening, and knowledge-sharing are achieving intended results.

WomenStrong is guided by the [value creation cycle framework developed by Wenger, Trayner, and de Laat](#).¹



Adapted from Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat (2011)

Our framework focuses on four cycles within a learning network: 1) activities that bring immediate value based on the perceived quality and usefulness of those interactions by participants; 2) activities that build potential value by producing “knowledge and social capital” among learners; 3) the development of applied value that is measured through changes in practice; and finally, 4) the achievement of realized value through improvement in program performance by participants.

To measure our results, we draw from multiple sources of data such as online surveys and in-depth interviews with our Learning Lab partners, to understand the value they have derived from peer interactions, webinars, technical assistance, and other activities. We also monitor the use of provided tools, such as an online learning portal, and the quality of interactions and sharing among partners that participate in various programs.

WomenStrong’s internal evaluation helps us understand whether we are progressing toward our outcomes, and if so, how; the evaluation also helps us interrogate how change is occurring, so that we can further refine our theory of change and adapt our grantmaking and program activities to align with our objectives.

Advancing Partner Learning

WomenStrong also supports Learning Lab partners as they monitor and evaluate their own programs in ways they determine to be suitable and useful, while ensuring that they have the tools and the confidence to share what they are learning with their various stakeholders.

The way we work with our partners is premised on the same belief as our original impetus for creating WomenStrong: that local organizations and the women who lead them have extensive experience and knowledge about their communities, the issues women and girls face, and how to address those issues effectively.

We emphasize learning for program improvement, rather than accountability, encouraging partners to think creatively about leveraging existing data to its full potential.

WomenStrong has three objectives to advance our partners’ Knowledge and Learning:

1. Support each organization’s own learning during the grant period;
2. Increase, as needed, our partners’ understanding of traditional monitoring and evaluation frameworks and terminology; and
3. Foster an environment where partners gain confidence to share what they have learned and seek support to address challenges.

The first objective is to support each partner to maximize its organization’s learning during the grant period, taking a very broad view of what constitutes “learning.” Our aim is to focus on learning for program improvement, rather than on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities and approaches that emphasize partner organizations’ natural concerns about being accountable to their funders.

To this end, we encourage our partners not to develop new data collection systems solely for reporting to WomenStrong, but instead to expand their definitions of what counts as a data source and to think creatively about leveraging their existing data to its full potential.

We encourage partners to embed learning throughout their grant period by identifying opportunities to review their data regularly and adjust programs accordingly; consequently, we do not expect them to adhere to strict specifications established at the beginning of the grant.

As part of supporting our partner organizations’ learning, we ask them to share their learning questions and their plans for how they will answer these questions as part of their grant; the way in which we ask them to do so, however, has evolved over the course of our experience in implementing the Learning Lab.

For the first Lab cycle, we asked partners to fill out a table at the beginning of their grant period that relied on tracking indicators related to partners’ logic models. Realizing that this format was too rigid for some of our partners, for the next two Lab cohorts, we instead asked each of them to develop a “Knowledge and Learning Plan” that focused more on their definitions of success and the learning questions each would like to explore during the grant period.

Looking ahead, we are considering simplifying and broadening this process even further, by asking partners in future grant cycles to define just a few learning questions and to share with us their plans for answering them, in whatever format those plans may take. Our metric of the success of a partner’s Knowledge and Learning Plan is the extent of that organization’s data-informed learning during the project period, not its achievement of specific implementation targets or outcomes.

Our second objective is to increase each partner’s capacity to apply the terminology, frameworks, and technology used in traditional M&E.

Though we attempt to disrupt traditional M&E paradigms within the scope of our Learning Lab grants, we also recognize that the terminology, frameworks, and technology used in traditional M&E are valuable for our partners and improve their ability to communicate their approach and learnings with other funders, as well as with other stakeholders.



WomenStrong’s 2019 retreat for partners in the Girls’ Education and Empowerment Learning Lab included sessions on M&E terminology and frameworks.

Therefore, we also provide individual and collective learning opportunities targeted at addressing partners’ expressed M&E needs and interests. Examples of collective learning opportunities might include working sessions together at partner retreats and webinars that cover the basics of M&E, such as different methods of data collection, how to develop or select indicators, developing data collection tools, and data visualization.

A few months after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, we launched “M&E Fireside Chats”

webinars with open discussions about topics relevant to our current context, such as how to collect data by phone or social media and how to understand the needs of program participants when it is impossible to have in-person interactions with them. These discussions provided partners with opportunities to share their challenges as well as their strategies for getting the information they needed to adapt and respond to the needs of their participants.

And finally, **our third objective** is to foster a learning environment where partners gain confidence in sharing the learning they have generated and in seeking support to address challenges.

As mentioned earlier, the premise of our entire approach at WomenStrong is that all of our partner organizations have valuable expertise to share. Within M&E, this includes experiences developing different systems and tools to collect, manage, and use the data they gather. Within our Lab, we aim to cultivate a safe learning space where partners feel acknowledged and respected for the expertise they bring to the group, while also feeling comfortable enough to speak openly about challenges they face. Beyond our Lab, we seek both to amplify our partners’ learnings and to foster their confidence for participating in global conversations with peers, partners, and funders about monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

Adapting in Response to COVID

As it became clear that the uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic would result in prolonged disruptions to our plans, we recognized that our Learning Lab would no longer function as we had envisioned.

While some partners reported being able to find more time for organizational strengthening given that their programs were on pause and their teams were working remotely, others acknowledged that they were overwhelmed by responding to the immediate needs of their program participants, such as increased food insecurity as a result of the pandemic-related shutdowns of commerce and government. Regardless of where they fell on this spectrum, partners could no longer work in the same way(s), so we needed to rethink our work.

To understand our partners' changing needs and experiences, we gathered information through phone calls with each organization, emails, and their social media, and by tracking how Covid-19 was affecting the countries and communities where they work. With this information, we were able to adapt our approach, including by loosening restrictions on our grants and shifting our program activities.

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When we launched the Learning Lab, we had planned to host a series of webinars and facilitate discussions about organizational strengthening. But at the onset of the pandemic, we learned, unsurprisingly, that partners' needs and interests had changed, as well as their ability to participate and engage.

While WomenStrong continued to provide organizational strengthening within the Learning Lab, it has looked very different from what we had anticipated. For example, after restarting our webinars, the focus included self-care sessions, public health messaging around COVID, and how to reach program participants through remote programming – all based on the needs expressed by our partners.

Similarly, in many cases, our partners' other funding had slowed or shifted for their regular programs, and success for some partners during this period has been focused more on making it through this evolving emergency and on

targeting their activities expressly on meeting their participants' most urgent needs.

Based on what our partners have shared, we have been tracking how each of our anticipated outcomes within the Learning Lab has been affected. And given that over at least the first few months of the pandemic, so much changed on a weekly if not daily basis, we regularly revisited our theory of change and our outcomes, both to reflect on what was achievable, and on how to adapt our strategies to best work toward our goal.

What's Next

Since WomenStrong began implementing our new model, we have regularly reflected on and interrogated our work to understand whether our ways of interacting and supporting partners through our grantmaking and our Learning Lab are in line with the underlying premise that they are experts in their field.

To this end, WomenStrong is currently collecting data so that we can understand if and how we are progressing toward our outcomes and meeting the expectations of our partners. External consultants have conducted in-depth interviews over Zoom with each partner, both to evaluate our work with them and to identify further areas for improvement.

We look forward to sharing those results in the coming months, as well as our continued learning about how we can effectively support women-driven organizations to respond to the needs of their participants. We look forward as well to sharing the lessons of our partners with the wider community of stakeholders working to improve the lives of women and girls.

ENDNOTE

¹Wenger, E., Trayner, B., de Laat, M. (2011). *Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: a conceptual framework*. Ruud de Moor Centrum.

This technical brief was authored by Amy Gregowski, Director of Research and Mara Steinhaus, Senior Research and Learning Specialist, WomenStrong International.

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info@womenstrong.org
www.womenstrong.org