

FUNDING FEMINIST LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS: A LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS



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INTRODUCTION: WHY FOCUS ON FUNDING LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS?

In recent years, feminist organizations and movements worldwide have begun to articulate an important resourcing need: **funding to support feminist¹ leadership transitions**. Foundation for a Just Society (FJS) has consistently heard from our partners about their need for higher quality support to navigate leadership transitions successfully and build greater organizational strength. These conversations with our partners have deepened our understanding of how organizations make transitions, and what it takes to support growth and momentum in an organization during a period of change. This, in turn, has enriched our approach to supporting organizations to grow into the future and helped us to build more robust funding portfolios. By responding to our partners' requests for resources and solidarity during leadership transitions, we, as funders, can help organizations to become more robust and continue to have impact in their communities and beyond. We are eager to share these learnings with our peers in the funder community.

As a funder-ally to our partners, we take seriously our responsibility to listen to and learn from them. We want to understand why leadership transitions, while distinct opportunities for organizational transformation, are also potentially moments of precarity and pain. We also seek to determine as funders how we can more effectively support leadership transitions, bolstering organizational sustainability and the resilience of movements.

Navigating the opportunities and potential pitfalls of moving through a leadership transition is a relatively new area of learning and practice for feminist organizations and their funders. The transition from one leader to the next (or sometimes from one way of organizing leadership to another) is often challenging, but thoughtful support can alleviate or soften the difficulty, especially when a moment of transition is re-framed as an opportunity. Planning provides important preparation for transitions and needs to be undertaken well in advance of the actual leadership handover. We are learning from partners that funders can support successful transition processes with thoughtful accompaniment² and good quality funding.

¹ FJS takes an inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism. Our feminism is expansive, centers racial justice, and provides a framework to understand and address the multiple injustices that shape the lives of women, girls, and LGBTQI+ people.

² At FJS, accompaniment is defined as support that goes beyond funding for programming and is explicitly intended to address organizational development needs. Accompaniment grants are supplemental to grants for programming, and are typically termed "capacity building" or "organizational development grants" in philanthropy. Accompaniment grants cover the costs of consultancies and other types of support, including for strategic planning and monitoring, learning, and evaluation (MEL); financial management and fundraising; physical and digital safety and security; self-care; and more.

In the past three decades, feminist organizations and movements have lobbied for and gained representation in international, regional, and national advocacy and decision-making spaces and have attracted significant support from funders. Despite this progress, resourcing for feminist movements remains woefully inadequate. However, the increased funding support that has materialized, elevated the visibility and influence of many larger organizations on both regional and international levels. As part of this shift, many organizations have also adopted more formalized structures (indeed, in many cases, philanthropic and government support has required organizations to formalize in particular ways). These more formalized feminist organizations often experience a particular sort of pressure during periods of leadership transition. They are often scrutinized by funders according to more prescriptive, hierarchical, and competitive organizational benchmarks. These shifting expectations may compel organizations to downplay or de-emphasize feminist values, processes, and practices. This can create tensions for Boards, staff, and community members.

An additional and more recent trend is a shift within feminist and women's rights ecosystems from predominantly white Global North leaders to leaders from the Global South representing historically marginalized communities and identities. Increasingly, Global South feminist leaders are stepping into executive leadership roles within global human rights organizations; local, national, and regional organizations and networks are experiencing similar transitions. These shifts create an opportunity, and indeed an imperative, to understand what emerging leaders, especially from the Global South, need in order to be set up for success and to ensure that leadership transitions are moments when organizations can grow stronger. No matter why they happen, leadership transitions are an opportunity for an organization to pause, reflect on its mission and challenges, grapple with mistakes, reckon with how it may need to grow, and take the opportunity for change and even reinvention.

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³ Feminist values include inclusivity, accountability, collaboration, courageousness, power sharing, anti-racism and anti-ableism, and centering the leadership of the women, girls, and LGBTQI people most impacted by oppression. These values can be embraced (or neglected) during leadership transitions.

It is also important to acknowledge that the current political context is extremely challenging and that leadership transitions are taking place in increasingly hostile environments. A turn toward, and a hardening of, repressive rule in countries throughout the world, including the United States, has accelerated attacks on justice agendas and hard-won human rights. Feminist and women's rights movements drive resistance while confronting fierce repression. In this threatening context, the need for flexible and generous support to feminist movement leaders and their organizations to resist harassment and repression is urgent and central to their ability to do their vital work. Adding to this unsettling shift, funding cuts continue to impact the entire ecosystem. Many governments that have traditionally been important funders of feminist civil society organizations are making drastic funding cuts, and we are also seeing private philanthropy reduce funding to feminist movements. These funding shifts have damaging consequences and make it all the more critical for funders to step up with flexible funding to provide support throughout an organization's life cycle, including its leadership transitions. Ultimately, only by fortifying their leadership, can feminist organizations withstand the dual pressures of diminishing resources and rising repression globally.

In talking with partners about this issue, FJS is convinced that support for leadership transitions has been inadequate, and that funders have historically overlooked crucial learning and knowledge-building in this area. However, we also see a growing awareness among gender justice funders that leadership transitions need and deserve specific forms of support—now more than ever.

To bridge this critical gap in knowledge and practice, FJS and Gender Funders CoLab (CoLab), a community of gender justice funders, commissioned a landscape analysis in 2024 to explore perspectives from philanthropy and feminist movements about opportunities and needs for supporting feminist leadership transitions more holistically. This brief presents key learnings from the research, preliminary conclusions and recommendations, and next steps. (More background on the landscape analysis is discussed in the Methodology section).

OBJECTIVES

In conducting in-depth conversations with both funders and feminist leaders,⁴ FJS and CoLab aimed to meet three key objectives:

- To address the dearth of knowledge and spaces for engagement needed to build funders' understanding of how to support feminist leadership development and transitions, particularly in a Global South context;
- To understand the challenges, gaps, and opportunities in funding and supporting leadership transitions holistically; and
- To assess, interrogate, and shift philanthropic practices that have not served Global South leaders and their organizations well and to identify and implement practices that will meaningfully support them.

METHODOLOGY

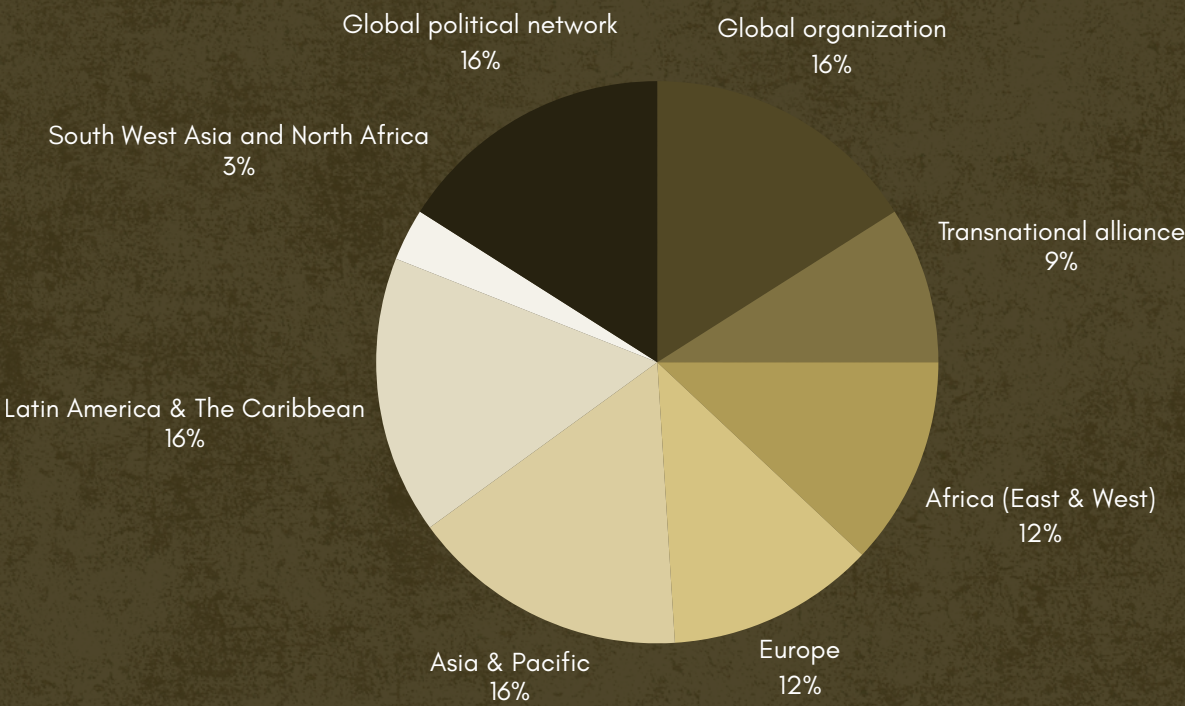
The approach used in the landscape analysis was to conduct in-depth interviews with civil society feminist leaders and program officers and directors of private foundations (all members of CoLab). CoLab hired Ishita Chaudhry to conduct this landscape analysis. Chaudhry and her colleague Bhawna Khattar interviewed 16 representatives of 10 Gender Funders CoLab members ("funders") and 32 feminist leaders between March and December 2024 to inform this analysis.

This brief identifies challenges to holistic and sustainable leadership transitions within feminist organizations and provides some pathways forward for funders to consider and invest in. The analysis is based on conversations with 48 individuals representing 29 organizations and two independent consultants between April and December 2024.

⁴ Feminist leaders interviewed include founders, Executive Directors, Chief Executive Officers, Board members, and staff of feminist organizations, collectives, and networks; feminist and movement activists; and, organizational development consultants and practitioners accompanying leadership transitions and change management processes. All of these leaders have strong roots in the movements and organizations they serve.

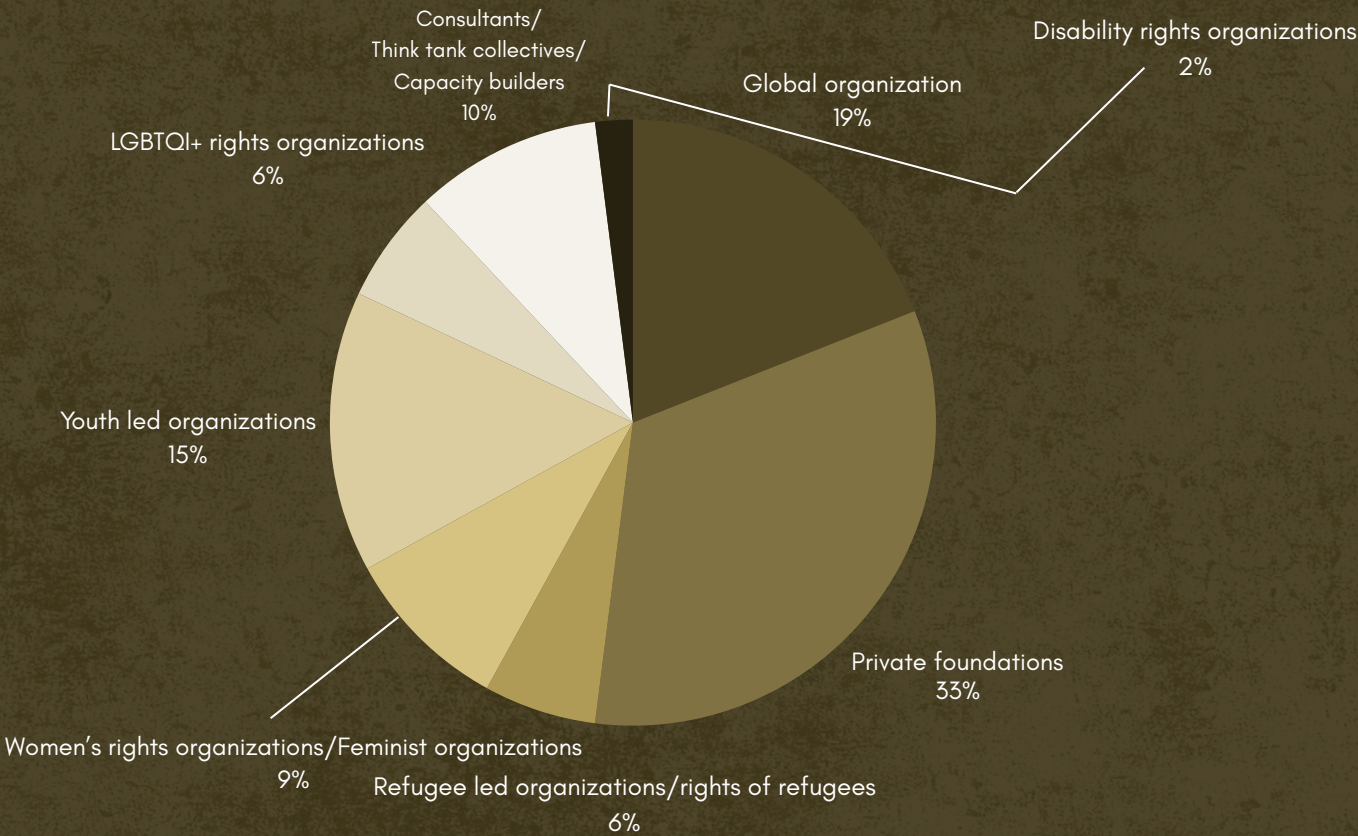
Participants represented/came from the following contexts:

FEMINIST LEADERS PER REGION



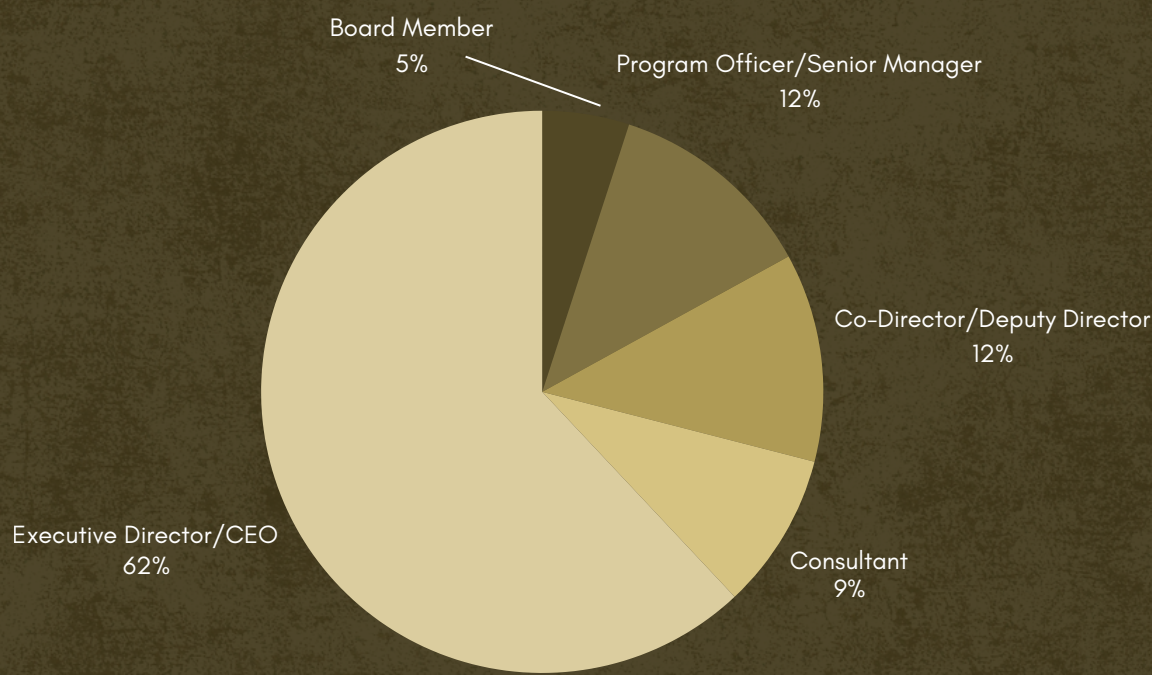
Note: Funders interviewed are not included in the graph above as 94% of funders interviewed are based in the United States and Canada, and 6% are based in Europe.

FEMINIST LEADERS AND FUNDERS INTERVIEWED BY TYPE OF ORGANIZATION



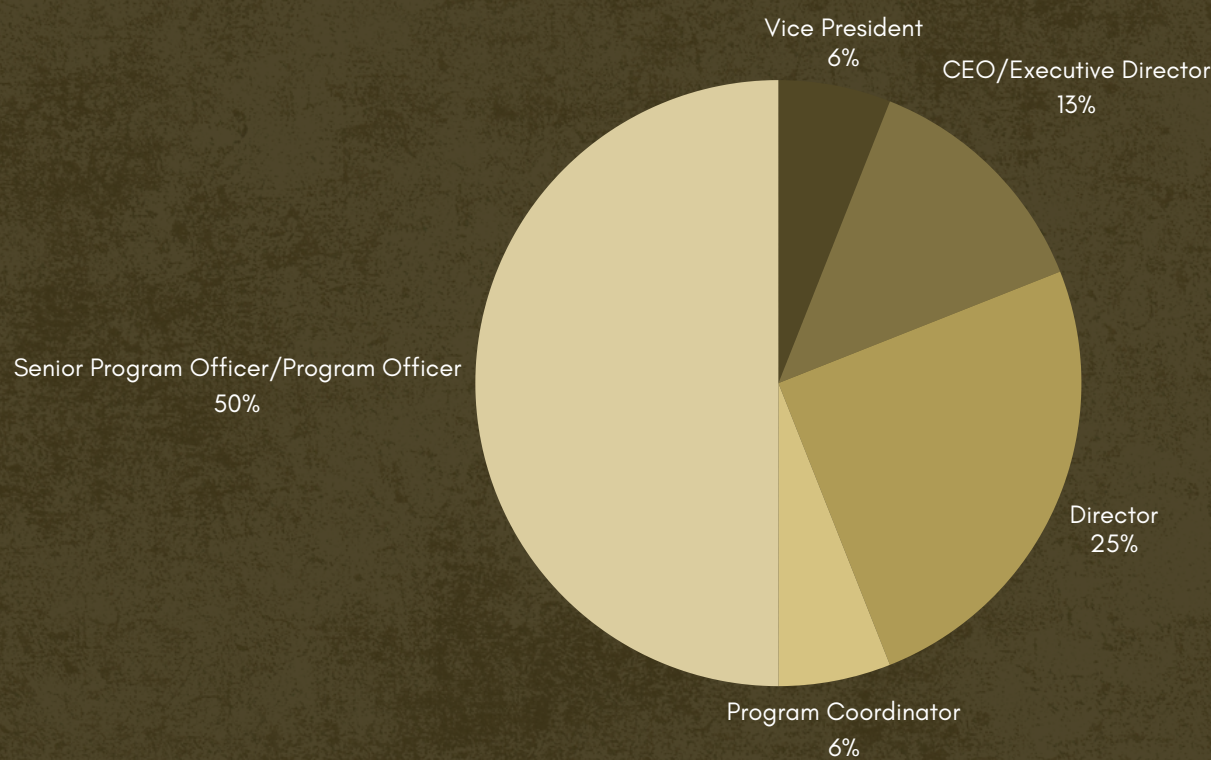
Note: All categories other than global organizations represent organizations that are working at the national and regional levels. Global organizations in this mapping represented young feminist funds and transnational networks registered in the Global North. While this graph does not include the type of context that each organization is operating in, it is important to note that 4% of the organizations interviewed were operating in conflict or military zones at the time of interview.

ROLES AMONGST FEMINIST LEADERS INTERVIEWED



Note: Some interviewees held multiple roles. For example, a current consultant was also a current Board Member of a feminist institution having undergone a leadership transition, and they had also previously been an ED.

ROLES AMONG FUNDERS INTERVIEWED



FINDINGS FROM THE LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

1. UNDERSTAND THE BREADTH OF AN ORGANIZATION'S CONTEXT

We are experiencing ongoing armed conflict, we need to ensure safety for incoming leaders and everyone else. Due to militarization, many in senior leadership were targeted and had to relocate, so as an organization, we need to be prepared. Succession planning has to be a long-term plan, to prepare an incoming leader for dealing with such circumstances, and invest in building a second line and tertiary of leadership. This involves advocating with the donors to support both long-term planning and responding to emergent threats. We provide physical and digital security training for all staff and leaders. That kind of knowledge is important to share.

- Executive Director, Grassroots Collective (Asia & Pacific)

In our organization, we went from decision-making being on the shoulders of one person to being a shared responsibility because our region is going through a moment of crisis, and we are at risk of violence. This has changed the game for us because it gives us the chance to strengthen not only our work, but also our sense of identity as an organization led by trans people. Having an executive team that has a diversity of trans voices represents our constituency better and protects us from being targeted individually as defenders.

- Executive director, trans organization (Latin America and the Caribbean)

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

The context in which organizations exist matters. Funders can only provide partners with appropriate, responsive support when we understand the breadth of an organization's context—and context is inherently complicated and multi-layered. Feminist organizations inhabit many different external contexts: regional, national, and cultural. Additionally, they have internal contexts, such as an organization's history, its form (e.g., NGO, unregistered collective, network, etc.), and its thematic focus. They also exist within larger movement ecosystems. All of these contexts bear on leadership and leadership transitions within an organization, and all are relevant for funders in understanding an organization.

The feminist leaders interviewed for this project recognize that many CoLab funders (mostly in and of the Global North) deeply trust their partners (mostly in and of the Global South) and reliably show up for them with empathy and understanding. However, they also noted that a trusting relationship between funder and partner does not guarantee that the funder will understand the partner's local contextual realities (e.g., political, cultural, regional, national, etc.), the organization's particular history and development, or how power plays out in the partner's context.

Even supportive funders may not fully appreciate how class, caste, and race operate to maintain systems of oppression and power relations in a given context. Funders need to bring openness and curiosity to conversations with partners in order to understand partners' many contexts. Being tuned in to an organization's multiple contexts will support funders to understand the breadth of the challenges that organizations and their leaders face and the support that they need to move toward their vision.

It is also worth underscoring that many civil society groups and social movements are operating in contexts of armed conflict, militarization, and war. Activists experiencing danger, trauma, and extreme psychological stress live in a particular reality that needs to be recognized and held with care. One queer activist described a nervous breakdown they experienced after transitioning out of the organization they had led for ten years and witnessing their office burn to the ground: *"I understood that I always held the burden that someone will die. We are in a struggle where people die, right? And I knew deep inside that everyone was in denial about it. Each of my team members was at risk of dying, but we would never talk about that."* Since conflict is often relentless, leaders and organizations working and living in contexts of militarization, armed conflict, and war need to be able to share their experiences and heal collectively during leadership transitions through both individual and collective support.

FOR FUNDERS' REFLECTION

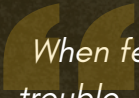
One way that funders can honor the different contexts in which our partners work is by learning about their realities and not imposing NGO-like organizational models or rigid ideas of what will achieve impact on Global South organizations. As funders, we need to be open and curious about how organizations organize leadership and decision-making in response to their contexts. It is crucial to understand and respect a partner's unique vision for its work and journey. Some organizations aim to expand, while others are focused on deepening their work. To support an organization's autonomous visions, funders need to build deeper knowledge of their Global South partners' contexts and how they are structuring and organizing leadership and governance models in response to their lived realities. In situations where activists are contending with life-threatening violence, we must learn to provide agile support that is responsive to harsh and dangerous circumstances. One way that funders can respond to these realities is by providing resources for healers, therapists, and trauma experts to conduct and facilitate conversations within organizations.

2. SUPPORT VALUES-ALIGNED LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS



Give organizations space, allow people to grow, trust the speed at which [a leadership transition process] moves.

- Organizational development practitioner (Africa)



When feedback and funding from a Program Officer becomes the same thing, we know we are in trouble, because the funder now has a stake in how the organization is shaped, rather than trusting its intrinsic journey.

- Executive director, youth organization (Asia)



We had six retreats of community dialogue. We had young leaders who wanted to be nominated to be directors, and people who wanted to be board members. People loved the idea that there is no one kind of hero at the top of the organization.

- Executive director, civil society organization (Southwest Asia and North Africa)

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

In feminist movement ecosystems, organizations are paying increasing attention to how they organize and transfer leadership and power. Analyzing gendered power relations is at the heart of feminist practice, and feminists look critically not only at how power is distributed and used in societies, but also at how it is organized, exercised, and transferred within their own organizations. In recent decades, feminist organizations, including in the Global South, have become more formalized (e.g., developing theories of change, governance structures, and MEL systems), often to comply with funder requirements. In this context of more formally structured organizations, feminist leaders are giving more attention to ensuring that leadership practices and transitions are aligned with an organization's deeply held feminist values. They invite funders to join them in this reflection.

Leadership transitions require an openness to learning and a readiness to take risks and try new things. Organizations wanting to experiment with new leadership forms must be ready to learn from mistakes and try new models of building and sustaining leadership. For example, a grassroots organization advocating for the rights of LGBTQI people in the Southwest Asia and North Africa region described a two-year, community-based leadership transition, during which they created a process, rebuilt their infrastructure, and identified new models of leadership to explore. They also held dialogues with organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean to take advantage of peer learning. This type of process is rich with potential but also requires time, spaciousness, and resourcing.

In interviews for this landscape analysis, self- or constituency-led organizations (e.g., organizations led by individuals from the movements they represent) tended to report having planned for transitions in ways that aligned with their values and were accountable to their movements. Their leadership transitions were also often consciously embedded in their strategic plans. These self-led organizations made an effort to build Board and staff capacity to prepare for and develop a shared vision for leadership transitions. All of these steps contributed to more successful, fruitful transitions.

Different Global South social movements take various approaches to leadership and governance. In our interviews, for example, organizations from environmental and Indigenous movements reported more collective governance structures than gender justice organizations, which tended to operate more hierarchically.

FOR FUNDERS' REFLECTION

It is important for funders to allow partners going through leadership transitions to take the space and time they need as transitions unfold. A leadership transition does not occur in a single moment; rather, it is a journey with its own ebb and flow, often unfolding as a multi-year process. Some practical steps that funders may consider to support partners engaged in leadership transitions include offering check-in meetings and accompaniment grants. It is important to trust partners' transition journeys. Even as we offer support and a listening ear, we should be aware of not becoming too involved in a transition and check that we are not judging feminist leaders—especially Global South leaders—on the basis of bias, prejudice, and assumptions. As funders, being in active solidarity with our partners means understanding and respecting a partner's leaders and the organization's central values. It may also be useful to connect partners that can share relevant transition experiences with each other.

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3. IMPROVE FUNDER SUPPORT BY PAYING ATTENTION TO POWER AND PRIVILEGE

In the LBQ space, there are gay men from dominant castes in elite spaces who can access funding. It is a question of who has access to Global North spaces, and [who has] language access, [which is] connected to caste and class. [This shapes] who leads organizations.

- Program officer, private foundation (United States)

One thing that is distinct for the incoming leaders from the Global South is that they have to prove they are worthy of leadership in shorter time frames. The white leaders don't have to prove anything, even if their success rate is lower.

- Program director, private foundation (United States)

[There's] the added psychological pressure of being the first Brown, Black, Latin, or you name it person in this position of leadership. They feel they cannot 'fail' their entire community. If funders are not going to be in closer conversation about how to create the enabling environments for them to succeed, it will not work.

- Director, private foundation (United States)

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

Issues of power and privilege are complex and context-specific. In providing support for leadership transitions within feminist organizations, funders need to be in conversation with our partners about how privilege (e.g., class, race, caste, gender, sexuality) operates within a given context and organization. Not all Global South leaders have the same level of access to funding, decision-making, and advocacy spaces. Understanding how privilege operates in a local context will help funders make their processes more responsive. Building a more diverse cohort of movement leaders—bringing in youth, queer, disabled, Indigenous, and caste-oppressed people—must receive consistent and ongoing attention. Nurturing the development of diverse movement leadership will contribute to ensuring that not only the most privileged people are favored for leadership roles.

Another dimension of power and privilege is the power that we, as funders often based in the Global North, hold. While gender justice funders embrace concepts of “shifting power” and “racial justice,” this landscape analysis shows that Global South leaders are often subjected to funders’ assumptions that are rooted in racist and colonial mindsets. Global South leaders are expected to prove their worthiness, capacity, and skill, often within set timelines and under the pressure of crisis-ridden contexts. These expectations often undermine leaders’ possibilities for success.

Global South EDs openly discussed a host of inequitable and damaging assumptions that they have experienced. For instance, funders may have biases about preferred forms of leadership in Global South organizations. Feminist leaders noted that many funders think that Global South leaders, and particularly people of color in the Global South, should work within a co-leadership model. Movement leaders experience this as a lack of trust in Black, Brown, young, and disabled leadership.

There has been increasing interest in the co-executive leadership model over the past decade, but one size does not fit all. While co-executive leadership is one powerful model, it requires clear roles, functions, and accountability, and individuals who are committed to working in partnership. Feminist leaders interviewed discussed many other promising collective leadership models, including rotational leadership, senior management teams, deputy directors, advisory councils, and movement assemblies. It is important for organizations to have the space to choose the model that works best for their organization in their context.

Global South EDs also discussed feeling that they are expected to have the bandwidth and skills to solve all issues in an organization related to oppression and injustice, even though it is not their primary role. Incoming leaders often inherit incomplete diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), or racial justice processes and are expected to resolve them quickly, since there is often an assumption that because someone is from a marginalized identity they will be an expert in DEI.

The expectation that Global South leaders should be able to resolve complicated issues quickly exacerbates the psychological weight they carry. Funders frequently impose short time-frames, and deem a failure to deliver as an indication of incompetence. Leadership transitions take time; indeed, most feminist leaders consulted for this landscape analysis said at least two years (accounting for the entire planning and transition trajectory). Leadership transitions ideally begin with transition and succession planning long before an 'outgoing' leader transitions out; these important processes require reflection and care, allowing staff, Boards, and constituents to engage deeply. Respect for the time and care these processes require is important.

Frequently, the lived experience aspect of their identity is seen as more defining to their leadership than their work history and skillset.

13

Feminist leaders also reflected on the assumption that people with lived experience stepping into leadership should share their personal stories of trauma to raise funds. Frequently, the lived experience aspect of their identity is seen as more defining to their leadership than their work history and skillset.

FOR FUNDERS' REFLECTION

Organizations in a leadership transition process are best placed to choose a new leader; this decision appropriately lies with a group's governing body, staff, and constituency. However, as funders, we are often in a good position to share insights or create opportunities to explore new leadership models based on our experience of working across issues and geographies. Feminist leaders with whom we spoke encouraged funders to resource dialogues and peer learning exchanges to support transformative leadership transitions that set leaders up for success. Feminist leaders also reminded us to be thoughtful in exercising our influence and power. A funder's missteps can potentially destabilize—even undermine—an organization. As funders, we need to be reflective about our role in supporting transitions, offering the benefit of our broad experience, while also respecting our partners' autonomy and overstepping.

4. FUND CARE, WELLBEING, AND PROTECTION INITIATIVES

“People are really scared when it comes to transitioning [out]. You've worked in this organization for ten years or more, your power is in this movement. This organization is like your child. You've been operating with high energy, and then Friday, you transition [out]. What is going to happen to you Monday?”

- Organizational development consultant (Africa)

“Organizations have not been good about creating a space that is soft and respectful for leaders who are transitioning out. The individuals leaving are often not fully whole, because they have given so much. They leave and then have to spend time and resources trying to repair themselves and become whole again with little support.”

- Organizational development consultant (United Kingdom)

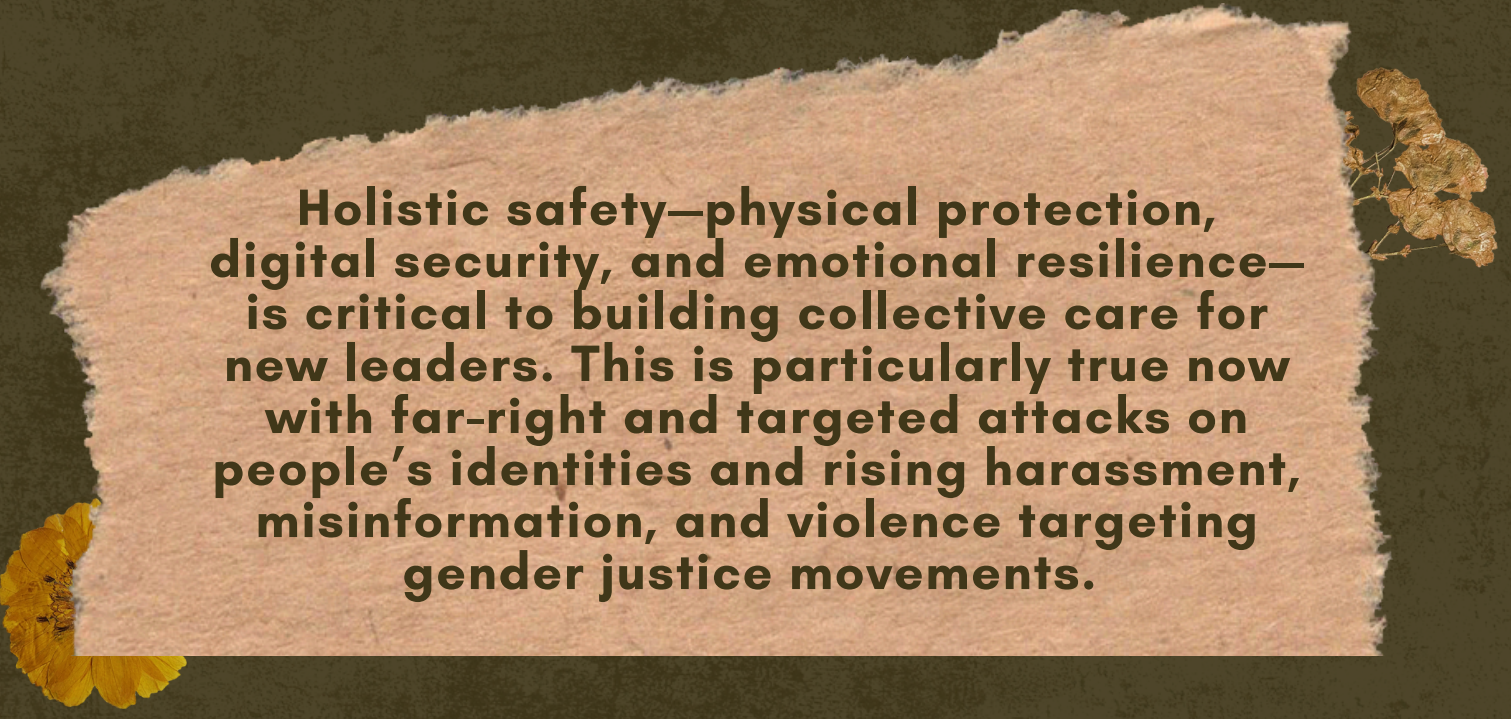
“She (the funder) reached out to me and said, ‘I want to speak to you. I want to chat with you.’ That was maybe two months into me starting as ED. It was very comforting and gave me a soft landing. She also provided funds for coaching for me and my team.”

- Executive director, youth organization (Africa)

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

These quotes highlight the importance of resourcing holistic care and support in the process of leadership transitions—both for outgoing and incoming leaders. Outgoing leaders have given extensively of their time, energy, ideas, and care, and they need support to rest and recover. Incoming leaders, especially from the Global South, are taking on a demanding, often exhausting, task in providing leadership at pivotal moments in their organizations. They are often challenging the status quo within their organizations by occupying spaces that have traditionally been held by white, Global North leaders. Holistic safety—physical protection, digital security, and emotional resilience—is critical to building collective care for new leaders. This is particularly true now with far-right and targeted attacks on people's identities and rising harassment, misinformation, and violence targeting gender justice movements.

Developing the spirit and practice of care and protection is culture-building work that is relevant to an organization's leaders and staff. Leadership transitions are often difficult experiences. They require an organization to say goodbye to an outgoing leader, welcome an incoming leader, and engage with the needs and feelings of the staff and volunteers who remain in a changed organization.



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FOR FUNDERS' REFLECTION

While funders recognize the value of sustainability, we often fail to acknowledge the emotional shifts and unconscious processes that transitions produce within people and organizations. When funders extend grace, time, and resourcing for care and protection initiatives to allow incoming leaders to build relationships and trust with Boards, staff, allies, and funders, we contribute to building an organization's flexibility and resilience.

In responding to requests from feminist leaders for support with safety, security, and health issues, a range of initiatives can be considered. Funders can create a roster of healers, coaches, psychotherapists, and trauma experts that have expertise in psychoanalysis, healing work, Indigenous medicine, and other interventions and treatments to support leaders and their organizations. As funders, we can offer to connect leaders and organizations with practitioners who are attuned to the challenges they are facing. We can also support documentation and knowledge sharing about building effective processes that enable holistic safety and collective care. This knowledge-building is an important contribution to the field. The availability of financial and human support during transition processes can alleviate stress and hold people through emotional periods of change and uncertainty.

While funders recognize the value of sustainability, we often fail to acknowledge the emotional shifts and unconscious processes that transitions produce within people and organizations.

5. SUPPORT BOARD STRENGTHENING AND GOVERNANCE

A very professional governance design is key [for a leadership transition]. We have an independent Board that reflects our identity and other identities that are a part of our network, which brings real power. The Board knew from the beginning (of the transition) what was needed and how much time to invest. They acted with professionalism and kindness, and maintained confidentiality, taking care of the organization. Giving a year's notice must be tiring and hard, but this [transition] was not a two-month thing. [We needed time] for all the pieces to move.

- Executive director, global network (Canada)

The challenge is that nobody within not-for-profits understands governance, and we do not talk about capacity building for Boards around it. So if the Board does not understand governance, then the ED is coming with more sense of governance because they've worked in multiple places. The Board members are activists who are coming on because they think it's a noble cause. Everyone is grappling with it [how to strengthen governance Board governance].
- Queer feminist activist (Asia)

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

Global South organizations receiving funding from private philanthropy and bilateral donors usually need to establish a Board or other governance body to fulfill donor requirements. This is particularly true for well-established, larger organizations and networks working at national, regional, and global levels. Community-based, grassroots, and unregistered groups are often able to receive money through intermediaries, like women's and feminist funds, without having to shift their ways of working, which are often more horizontal and movement-oriented. For larger, more formally structured organizations, however, the requirement to meet compliance obligations can divert energy from being accountable to their constituencies and movements. Many feminist leaders identify this as a governance challenge.

Indeed, according to feminist leaders interviewed, the requirement to adopt more hierarchical leadership models inherited from private sector and Global North institutions often hinders community building. Whereas many feminist and gender justice organizations tap movement allies and constituents for Board membership, there is often pressure to appoint Board members that have particular types of professional credentials, often at the expense of including members of the organization's core constituency. Over time, this may lead to less representation in an organization's Board of the people the group represents and to whom it is ultimately accountable. Feminist leaders raised this as a point of attention in thinking about organizational governance.

Despite these governance challenges, feminist leaders in more formally structured organizations acknowledge the pivotal role that Boards play in successful leadership transitions. Hiring leaders and keeping them accountable to the organization's mission is a primary responsibility of a Board (or other governance structure). Many feminist leaders from the Global South interviewed emphasized the importance of strengthening governance mechanisms and ensuring their adherence to feminist principles, like pay equity, comprehensive healthcare benefits, collective care and protection, and building organizational cultures that center racial and disability justice.

Boards also need clarity in terms of their role and function, including the importance of confidentiality, avoiding conflict of interest, and acting with integrity and in the best interest of the organization at all times. Boards need to own their responsibility for leadership transitions. They are responsible for deciding on process and outcome, including ensuring that outgoing leaders have what they need to support (not undermine) the transition and that incoming leaders are given the support they request (e.g., managing relationships, developing rapport with staff, connecting with funders, and knowing how to navigate potential reputational or other risks). Finally, Boards also carry responsibility for lending political backing, connections, and resourcing capacities to organizations in order to set up incoming leaders for success.

FOR FUNDERS' REFLECTION

As funders, we need to invest in building the capacities and commitment of Boards to support leadership transitions. Specifically, we can provide resourcing to strengthen a Board's political analysis of an organization's context and the Board's abilities to support, for example, youth-led, trans-led and lived experience leadership. It is also important to build and invest in Boards' capacities to prepare for and develop vision around leadership transitions and build transition planning into organizations' strategic plans.

As funders, we should stay alert to how our requirements may affect, and possibly divert, an organization's energy from its relationship with its core constituency. It is important to be aware of how resourcing to strengthen Boards and other governance systems can support (or complicate) successful leadership transitions.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO FUNDERS

Feminist leaders request that funders build our understanding of how to support successful feminist leadership transitions. They invite us to learn about and support the needs of incoming and outgoing leaders, taking into account the specific contexts of the Global South. They also invite funders to support and engage more deeply in exchanges, dialogues, and spaces to explore and interrogate power at moments of sensitive organizational change, like leadership transitions.

Specifically, feminist leaders interviewed are asking for **multi-year general support grants** with adequate funding to allow them to secure:

- Exit packages for outgoing leaders that provide financial stability for one to two years after departing from an organization;
- Time and space for incoming leaders to build their own way forward and to access a range of supports, including coaching, to withstand pressure and prevent burnout and attrition;
- Strengthened governance bodies and mechanisms, as required;
- The building of financial reserves and resilience, including two key things:
 - Accompaniment grants for leadership transitions that are tailored to grantee needs and go beyond supporting the handover moment;
 - Funding in-person and online meetings where peer-learning and the sharing of experiences between leaders (incoming, outgoing, second-line) generate greater collective care and build resilience in the ecosystem.

Additionally, feminist leaders talked about funders' vital role in resourcing financial and institutional stability in ways that enable successful leadership transitions. Funders can support the creation of **enabling environments within organizations** that equip leaders, Boards, staff, and movement constituencies to meet the demands of leadership transitions, putting organizations in a position not only to weather the stress of a transition but also to grow and emerge stronger. The research identified six important precursors that support successful leadership transitions:

- **Financial security (at least six to twelve months of operating reserves) and secured annual funding for two to three years.** Longer-term financial health relieves anxiety about an organization's survival, gives outgoing leaders the freedom to think about non-financial aspects of their transition, and provides incoming leaders with the space and time to figure out new pathways for the organization to reach its mission.

- **Benefits, robust exit packages, pension funds, or other ways of securing the financial future of outgoing leaders** for a year or two after they depart. A measure of financial security allows departing leaders to focus on the organization's needs (rather than their individual futures).
- **A strong organizational work culture with distributed leadership throughout the organization.** Ideally, several people, in addition to the ED, hold a "bird's-eye view" of the organization. This allows for power sharing, collective building, and shared ownership of the mission as well as collective care for the sustainability of the organization.
- **Strong second-line and tertiary-level leadership** already in place within the organization. Transition and succession planning should focus on building different levels of leadership into an organization's culture. This investment sets up incoming and future leaders for success.
- **Processes that prepare the organization for a smooth leadership transition,** including staff and Board retreats with planning agendas, a roster of potential consultants and facilitators to guide transitions, strong communications plans, and fundraising strategies to support all of this.
- **A commitment to, and plan for, maintaining and transferring institutional knowledge,** especially when the organization is transitioning from a founder to a new leader who has been externally hired.



CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

Conversations with feminist leaders and gender justice funders have contributed to distilling several important insights in this still relatively new area of funding leadership transitions. First of all, it is clear that leadership transitions are often delicate moments of change within organizations. Moreover, feminist leaders and funders with whom we spoke noted that leadership transitions frequently become more complex when individuals from the Global South, often representing marginalized communities and identities, assume leadership that has previously been held by white/Global North leaders. It is not uncommon for leaders from the Global South to experience racism and unfair, tokenistic scrutiny. When leadership transition processes are well resourced, however, they can become important moments of growth, transformation, and strengthening for an organization. Funders can play an important role in providing good quality resources to ensure that leadership transitions, especially in Global South organizations, become an opportunity to pause, take stock, and move forward in strength. These transitions are moments of great potential, but this potential needs to be nourished, not squandered, so that organizations can take advantage of the moment.

This research, though complete, is simply the beginning of a deeper dialogue. We are grateful to the lead researchers, Ishita Chaudhry and Bhawna Khattar, along with Juliana Vélez, FJS Global Senior Program Officer, and Rophiat Bello, FJS Global Program Associate, for their instrumental contributions in shaping this work. We are eager to continue these conversations with you—our funding peers—to reflect on our role and responsibility in these transitions, and to collectively build a more resilient and equitable ecosystem for feminist movements.

