

# THE HEWLETT FOUNDATION'S GLOBAL REPRODUCTIVE EQUITY STRATEGY

## SUMMARY REPORT: FIRST LEARNING REVIEW

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In September 2021, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation launched its [Global Reproductive Equity \(GRE\) strategy](#). Built on the foundation's long-standing commitment to advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), the strategy's goal is that "women and girls in East and West Africa, especially those facing the greatest barriers, are increasingly able to seek, access, and use comprehensive reproductive health care — including abortion care — to further their health, well-being, and life aspirations." The GRE strategy focuses on **four interrelated areas of work**: ecosystem strengthening, narrative change, solutions to mitigate inequity in access to and use of contraception and abortion care, and safe abortion. A team of independent learning and evaluation consultants, the authors of this report, are accompanying the GRE team as they implement the strategy. Our efforts to facilitate learning and refinement throughout strategy implementation involve multiple activities, including the first learning review summarized in this document.

## How the foundation seeks to support global reproductive equity

In keeping with the GRE strategy's strong focus on equity, rights, and justice, the foundation aims to apply an equity lens to its approach by:

- Amplifying the voices of African women and girls who face the greatest barriers to SRHR, and focusing on addressing inequities in their access to and use of contraception and safe abortion care;
- Using a holistic orientation that encompasses reproductive health, rights, and justice and situates health outcomes in the context of women and girls' lives, well-being, and life aspirations;
- Shifting power and resources towards proximate actors who are closest to and directly impacted by SRHR policies, programs, narratives, and systems.

The GRE strategy also emphasizes an **ecosystem-level approach to advancing change** for purposes of supporting robust and effective SRHR work over the long term. As reflected in the GRE theory of change, this ecosystem-level approach recognizes that pathways to change are complex and dynamic, encompassing many actors working to advance (or oppose) SRHR, as well as contextual changes. These include pathways through which power is shared and shifted, complementarity among different ecosystem actors is strengthened, and learning is shared and used to inform action. As it learns about whether and how these pathways contribute to progress on SRHR, the foundation isn't just focused on documenting what the foundation, grantee partners, and other ecosystem actors do. Rather, it is seeking to understand how they do it – that is, understanding their ways of working, the conditions that they respond to, and how these ways of working impact the ecosystem as a whole.

To learn about what it takes to advance complex, dynamic ecosystem-level changes, the foundation has invested in a **multi-year learning and evaluation (L&E) process**. The focus is on **facilitating learning for – and in conversation with – the SRHR field**. In doing so, the foundation is intentionally stepping away from conventional evaluation approaches that presume a static set of indicators moving along a predictable and linear pathway to change. Instead, the L&E process is intended to be iterative and responsive, generating and integrating new insights, lessons, realizations, and ideas as the GRE strategy is implemented. The L&E process is facilitated by a team of four independent consultants who are embedded in the SRHR ecosystem that the GRE strategy supports, and who bring decades of experience as advocates and evaluators. The team is conducting three learning reviews over the course of a five-year period to gather and synthesize insights into how to effectively support the changes envisioned in the GRE strategy, complemented by ongoing activities to facilitate reflection, learning, and sharing among foundation staff, partners, and other ecosystem actors.

This summary report synthesizes findings from the first learning review, conducted in spring 2023. The learning review drew on information from grant documents, literature, the L&E team’s observations, and 27 interviews with a purposive sample of grantee partners and other SRHR ecosystem actors, encompassing individuals and organizations engaged in service delivery, policy advocacy, research, movement building, arts and media, local community work, funding, and capacity strengthening. The review offers early insights into where there are signs of progress across the strategy’s four areas of work — and what conditions and ways of working help explain progress or lack thereof.

## Clarifying key terms

In the context of the GRE strategy, Hewlett defines **proximate actors** as those who are closest to and directly impacted by SRHR policies, narratives, programs, and systems, including:

- Organizations headquartered in Africa
- Feminist movements with leadership in Africa
- Other African civil society actors such as unregistered and registered women’s groups and individual human rights defenders
- Country/regional offices of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs)
- National and subnational policymakers\*
- Community leaders\*

This definition includes the groups of actors that Hewlett supports directly or indirectly through intermediaries, as well as groups of actors that Hewlett does not fund or partner with (marked with \*).

The term **SRHR ecosystem actors** refers to the larger set of actors working to advance SRHR within a region. Hewlett defines this more encompassing term as including the groups of proximate actors listed above, as well as other non-proximate actors who seek to advance SRHR, such as funders, some INGOs, and multilateral development agencies.

The GRE strategy’s ecosystem-level approach intentionally recognizes that these two terms extend well beyond the GRE portfolio of grants.

# 1. Ecosystem strengthening

A significant pillar in the GRE strategy focuses on strengthening SRHR ecosystems in East Africa and Francophone West Africa (FWA). Informed by the strategy's equity lens, the work is intended to strengthen national and regional SRHR ecosystems led by proximate actors. The first learning review surfaced early signs of progress on three key components of ecosystem strengthening articulated in the **GRE theory of change**, but also identified a number of conditions that are inhibiting efforts to advance progress.

## Building connections and coherence within SRHR ecosystems

The GRE strategy aims to strengthen ecosystem actors' ability to connect with one another, understand one another's work, and coordinate, collaborate, and/or leverage their complementary roles within an SRHR ecosystem. Insights from the first learning review suggest that connections and collaborations are happening among some organizations — for example, via networks, forums, platforms, and coalition work. But the conditions are not yet in place for ecosystem actors to reach the level of mutual awareness, relationship building, coordination, and collaboration needed to leverage their potential complementarity and advance progress more effectively.

Conditions that inhibit connections and complementarity include:

- **A lack of mutual awareness, sharing, and coordination among funders.** This contributes to overlap and competition across grantees' efforts instead of synergy and complementarity, resulting in inefficient and ineffective distribution of resources within the ecosystem.
- **A hyper-competitive environment for scarce resources.** Fueled by funder pressure to claim credit for success as well as big funding opportunities that organizations flock to, fierce competition for resources undermines transparency and sharing among organizations.
- **Relatively few spaces for building lasting relationships and trust.** Efforts to foster connections can fall short of intentions when there aren't facilitated spaces or convening formats that allow ecosystem actors to reflect together on commonalities, gaps, and areas of complementarity.
- **A tendency to involve the same group of actors.** Regional platforms and other funder efforts that enable collaboration tend to involve the same familiar set of actors (often INGOs), leaving out smaller local community groups and movement actors that represent marginalized populations like the LGBTQIA+ community, sex workers, women living with disabilities, and refugees.

## Strengthening the capacity of proximate ecosystem actors

The GRE theory of change hypothesizes that strengthening the capacities of African organizations and movements is a key ingredient for bolstering SRHR ecosystems. This includes capacities related to organizational development goals like resource mobilization and strategic planning, as well as capacities that organizations need to have in order to be responsive to communities and constituencies. The first learning review surfaced some evidence that African organizations who are supported by Hewlett resources as grantees or subgrantees have been able to strengthen these kinds of capacities. This is due in part to flexible funding and supportive ways of working embraced by Hewlett and some Global North and African funders and intermediaries, which have reduced constraints on African organizations' ability to strengthen their capacities.

The review also pointed to persistent conditions that constrain the capacity of organizations and movements:

- **Pervasive inflexibility in the practices of many funders and intermediaries.** This includes restricted project funding and rigid adherence to predetermined plans, which hobble organizations' capacity to respond to evolving community needs and context.

- **Inadequate space to build solidarity and resolve tensions among movement actors.** Strengthening movement capacity to build a shared vision and solidarity requires more opportunities to explore differences in values and prioritize healing and wellbeing – both within and across organizations.

## Power shifting through funder and INGO ways of working

Power shifting is embedded in multiple pathways of the GRE theory of change. This first learning review focused on how power manifests in the flow of resources and decision-making power to Africa-headquartered organizations. Within the GRE portfolio, there is promising evidence of Hewlett’s efforts to increase the proportion of grant funds going to Africa-headquartered organizations, as opposed to INGOs headquartered in the Global North, over the first 1.5 years of the strategy’s implementation. Decision-making power has also shifted through the adoption of more equitable regranting practices by some of Hewlett’s intermediary partners. However, other efforts that Hewlett has made — such as funding African-staffed country or regional offices of INGOs, rather than their Global North headquarters — have not consistently resulted in power shifting, either internally among personnel or externally with civil society partners.

Conditions that stymie power shifting include:

- **Institutionalized power structures that make it difficult for INGOs to shift toward more equitable and inclusive practices.** This includes rigid systems and norms around accountability that dictate restrictive subgrant terms and requirements, and centralized staffing structures that concentrate funding for administrative and operational costs in Global North headquarters.
- **The common use of practices that reinforce power imbalances by major philanthropic and government funders of SRHR.** Evidence from the first learning review suggests that major donors continue to rely on practices that reinforce power imbalances – such as short-term, inflexible, project-based grants; time-intensive grant application and reporting requirements; and perpetual shifts in funder priorities. This makes it difficult to scale up power shifting at an ecosystem level. And grantees get caught in the middle trying to accommodate both “mainstreamed” ways of working that resist power shifting and alternative ways of working that prioritize power shifting.

Funders are uniquely positioned to leverage the power they have as holders of resources in order to deepen their contribution to SRHR ecosystems. Drawing in part on lessons from Hewlett’s own ways of working, the first learning review distilled key **funder practices that facilitate ecosystem strengthening**:

- **Support connections and complementarity** by intentionally reflecting on who is doing what within a portfolio, creating space for grantees to learn about who is doing what in the portfolio, and encouraging helpful connections among grantees, where relevant.
- **Shift power** by strengthening resource flows to grassroots movement building, using a responsive and long-term approach focused on the conditions and practices that contribute to durable and systemic change, and embracing honest learning about how power is — or is not — shifted.
- **Prioritize funder alignment and accountability** by engaging and coordinating with other funders, and developing a clear and coordinated strategy for advancing broader uptake of better funder practices.

## 2. Narratives about SRHR and gender equity

Hewlett is applying an exploratory lens to its nascent narrative work in sub-Saharan Africa, with a learning agenda to understand if and how African narratives that promote SRHR and gender equity influence public discourse and support for SRHR policies and programs. Early insights gathered in the first learning review surfaced examples of **dominant harmful narratives**, including narratives that portray women as dependent and submissive, and frame SRHR as a “women’s issue.” Interviewees identified **institutional and cultural mechanisms** through which these narratives are developed, disseminated, and repeated, such as government, religion, politics, and the news media. They also provided

preliminary insights into **what is needed to facilitate narrative change**, emphasizing that it matters **who is leading efforts** to change narratives (Africans, not the West), **which stories** are told (people’s lived experiences, including positive ones), and **what platforms and mediums** are used to effectively disseminate across a wide audience (including pop culture, mainstream entertainment, and other art forms).

A broader observation that emerged is the **lack of consensus and definitional clarity** around what a “narrative” is, how we know when narrative change has happened, and what “narrative change work” looks like. This creates ambiguity and confusion around the boundaries for this area of work — including who should be included, what evidence is relevant, and what supports are needed to advance supportive narratives more effectively. For example, some actors’ descriptions of narrative change work seem to refer to advocacy and communications tactics and strategies. Others, such as [a report published by the Convergence Partnership](#), have sought to clarify the distinct characteristics of strategic communications (e.g., time bound, attached to current policy demands, based on currently shared values) versus narrative change (e.g., decades-long, aimed at establishing or elevating new values and creating a “lasting authorizing environment” for change). To dig more deeply into this area of work, Hewlett has commissioned a team of research consultants to explore key learning questions around what it takes to create and sustain supportive African narratives that influence public opinion about SRHR, and to reduce the influence of harmful narratives.

### 3. Solutions to mitigate SRHR inequities

The GRE strategy focuses on advancing **solutions to mitigate inequity** in access to and use of contraception and abortion care by supporting efforts to develop and test these solutions, with pathways to scale. The review shared early learning about solutions that help address persistent inequities, and the conditions that help ensure those solutions can be adopted and scaled.

Grantee partners and other movement actors identified young people, sex workers, LGBTQAI+ persons, displaced persons, and pastoralists and other rural women as most marginalized. Barriers to access are typically based on **resources** (technology and financial resources to reach and pay for services) and **identity** (sex workers, sexually active unmarried adolescents, and others subject to social stigmatization). The barriers also relate to the availability of **infrastructure and services**. The review identified innovations that seek to address one or more of these barriers.

Three categories of service delivery solutions stood out across both FWA and East Africa as showing promising signs of responding to and mitigating inequities in access experienced by marginalized groups.

1. **Service delivery tactics** focus on expanding access for a particular group by attending to the specific barriers that limit their access. These tactics tend to be very localized and address a spectrum of resource, social, and structural barriers. One example of this: strengthening access for people who are sex workers or internally displaced by ensuring cooperation from pharmacists, facilitating transportation, and providing cell phones so these individuals can protect their privacy when ordering medication abortion (MA) pills and accessing information. Tactics like these are innovative solutions because they directly mitigate barriers that are specific to a marginalized community.
2. **Systems-level service delivery models** are working at the healthcare systems level to address access to a specific service (e.g., contraceptive access, abortion care) for the general population, including marginalized groups. These models typically involve collaborating with local or national governments, reflecting a conventional approach to scaling through structural alterations that could result in systemic change in the provision of specific services. An example of this: addressing economic barriers to access by providing free contraception in partnership with district health offices.
3. **Self-managed MA** was most cited as a revolutionary innovation, as it bypasses barriers and expands access to marginalized groups. Examples include creating platforms through which people can directly access information about MA, as well as working with distribution points, such as pharmacies, to strengthen people’s access to MA drugs. These and other examples expand access by protecting privacy, reducing provider bias, lowering costs, and reducing logistical obstacles.

The GRE strategy intends to lay pathways to scale for innovative solutions that advance equity in service delivery. While “going to scale” may be conventionally defined as models that become integrated into entire healthcare systems and reach across geographies and populations, insights from the learning review indicate that innovation is also happening in localized ways. Both ways address barriers experienced by most marginalized people. As the GRE theory of change posits, an ecosystem-level approach to successful scaling also involves sharing evidence around what works in order to contribute to better informed and coordinated replication of successful approaches. Based on information gathered for the first learning review, it isn’t yet clear whether the efficacy of these solutions is being documented and shared in ways that enable other organizations to access and use the results to inform their own efforts. This points to the need for deeper understanding of this pathway to change, exploring what it takes to support the generation, sharing, and use of evidence and learning to inform action.

## 4. Safe abortion

The GRE strategy aims to expand access to safe abortion by giving attention to constraints and conditions that have inhibited progress. The first learning review gathered promising examples of influential efforts to **advance policies, laws, and regulations**, and analyzed these for conditions enabling progress. The analysis also explored how Hewlett’s and other funders’ ways of working support these conditions, through who they fund and under what conditions, and the connections and complementarity they support within the ecosystem.

Throughout the region, some signs suggest the long, persistent work of moving abortion from the shadows to political and public discourse is securing incremental progress. Policy and legal progress is illustrated by significant changes in Benin (see details in reporting by Al Jazeera, The Guardian, and The New York Times) and more incremental success at adapting legislative tactics (East Africa) and developing court cases (Rwanda), which, even if unsuccessful, build experience and allies. Advocates observe expanded public space to raise the topic of abortion, and a sense of reduced stigma and risk when working to raise abortion on the public agenda. They are developing and drawing from an expanded, locally relevant evidence base to inform policy and legal decisions and public discourse. This progress is created through sustained and organized civil society advocacy and influence, particularly by coalitions operating across legal, medical/health, and policy fields. The table below summarizes these four areas of progress and insights into how change happens in each.

**Table 1. Safe abortion: Areas of progress and insights into how change happens**

Area of progress	Insights into how change happens
Policy/Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Coalitions/formal structures give support and political/social cover for members, provide the structures needed for collaboration, and help cultivate understanding of abortion access as a priority among policymakers.</li> <li>● Resourced, experienced coalitions identify and act on openings to shift policy change tactics to keep the legislation alive.</li> <li>● Advocates serve as trusted technical resources to inform government policy/guidelines, and engage policymakers in multiple areas of government.</li> <li>● The Maputo Protocol provides policy, political cover, and leverage.</li> <li>● A reduction in stigma allows public expression of concern about unsafe abortion and efforts to include abortion in public discourse.</li> </ul>
Public space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emblematic examples of the harm caused by unsafe abortion attract the public’s attention.</li> <li>● Discussion of unsafe abortion is integrated into other priority issues.</li> <li>● People become familiar with MA through its expanded access and use.</li> </ul>
Advocacy capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Coalitions/formal structures are supported with resources to cultivate members’ and allies’ understanding of abortion.</li> <li>● Coalitions/formal structures are supported with resources to engage in advocacy efforts, learn, and sustain attention and engagement.</li> <li>● Advocacy strategies reflect advocates’ knowledge, insight, and experience and respect their agency to develop appropriate and effective tactics.</li> </ul>
Strengthened evidence base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Research is designed to address specific barriers to access to safe abortion services and connect these to policy solutions.</li> </ul>



## **Cultivating the conditions for progress requires attention to abortion as highly contested, sensitive, and politicized.**

Negative reactions, ranging from passive ambivalence to organized resistance, are common, including among people working on reproductive health. Agendas to support access to safe abortion are also prone to rejection as part of a history of U.S./European colonialism and harmful international development agendas that are not aligned with African culture or values.

**Funder practices** that support safe abortion policy progress involve resourcing and working in ecosystem-responsive ways, as well as supporting conditions for cultivating insight, allies, and support:

- **Focus on multiple dimensions of change over long-term timeframes.** Funders' desire to see expedient change and attributable impact can narrow ambition to short-term and visible change that short-circuits prospects for durability. In FWA, for example, a narrow policy change agenda defined by funders didn't allow support for other critical changes, like cultivating support among service providers. When funders have **realistic change trajectories, they can help lay the groundwork for future progress.** For example, over a decade ago, Hewlett funded efforts by grantee partners to expand their efforts in FWA. This longer-term trajectory is now enabling changes in ecosystem capacity, public discourse (however nascent), and policy progress.
- **Resource and support locally grounded strategies.** Advocates argue that funding organizations grounded in the country and regions helps ensure that abortion goals, priorities, strategies, and tactics are guided by the wisdom, experience, knowledge, and skills of local advocates. Some funders are strident in defining their own agendas; Hewlett and some other funders have a track record of **resourcing committed partners who develop the necessary familiarity, skills, connections, insight, and experience to direct and adapt abortion policy and legal work.** These partners are not only well versed in the policy and legal bounds of abortion but also are capable of advocating for safe abortion services within the limits of the law.
- **Support constellations of committed advocates.** Coalitions provide social and political cover for advocates. Multiple interviewees said they or their organization would be unlikely to work on abortion without such coalitions because of concern that they or their organizations would be publicly targeted. Additionally, coalitions offer formal structures for resource allocation, alignment, and coordination. Information gathered in the first learning review suggests that Hewlett's GRE strategy and longer-term support for locally grounded coalitions supports their ability to engage in **adaptive advocacy that draws on a growing depth of experience.**

The unpredictable trajectory of policy change for a contested issue like safe abortion requires **active, responsive resources and intention.** Organizations committed to advancing access to safe abortion have the dual challenges of working on highly contested change and with limited funding. Support by Hewlett and other funders who are cognizant of and responsive to these conditions, and seek to shift them, are starting to translate to influential efforts to advance safe abortion policies, laws, and regulations.

## **Next steps in the learning process**

This first learning review began to identify where Hewlett's and other ecosystem actors' ways of working connect to intended outcomes, particularly around ecosystem strengthening and safe abortion access. The review also surfaced insights into where there may be challenges or gaps in the hypothesized pathways to change, including areas where we lack sufficient information or understanding of how progress happens or could happen.

Building on insights from the first learning review, the foundation's next steps focus on **reflection and shared learning.** This is important for the GRE team internally — to have time to reflect on the implications for their own assumptions and ways of working, and where they need to focus learning efforts next. To help ground these reflections in the strategy's theory of change and ecosystem-level approach, the L&E team is facilitating discussions with the GRE team around questions such as:

- What reflections does the first learning review prompt about **ways that power shifting is or is not happening?** Where are the systemic barriers to power shifting moveable and where are they more entrenched? What (more?) is needed to shift some of those barriers?
- What are we learning about **tensions between the GRE strategy and ways of working versus the other institutional systems and norms** that partners are accountable to, such as those set by other funders or systems of the institutions in which they operate? Where or how can Hewlett mitigate these tensions?
- What reflections does the first learning review prompt regarding the GRE team’s intentions to **strengthen shared learning and evidence** among funders? Are there areas where the GRE team could more deeply cultivate learning and sharing among other ecosystem actors?

Reflection and shared learning are also important for the GRE team’s aspirations to serve the learning needs of the broader SRHR field — to offer meaningful ways to share learning and actively engage other ecosystem actors with this learning. Grounded in the belief that learning grows as it gets shared, the foundation plans to draw on the first learning review to fuel exchanges of insights among grantee partners, peer funders, and other ecosystem actors. Through these exchanges with the field and other learning generated through the L&E process, the foundation will continue its efforts to deeply and creatively explore what it takes to advance progress toward an ambitious and holistic vision for equitable and comprehensive reproductive health care in East and West Africa.

## Acknowledgments

The first learning review reflects the insights, wisdom, and expertise of many individuals – including interviewees and others who have contributed to SRHR conversations through their writing and public speaking. All have helped deepen our collective understanding of the conditions, ways of working, and context that influence progress on SRHR in FWA and East Africa.

This learning partnership is shaped around the vision of Althea Anderson, Janet Holt, and Amy Arbreton, who share a deep commitment to learning and an enthusiasm for exploring new ways to generate and share that learning. They have been joined by many others at the foundation, particularly Kim Brehm, whose support has been critical to the L&E team’s ability to harness information and work closely with the foundation.

This summary report was written by the team of independent consultants who are facilitating the L&E process for the GRE strategy: [Coumba Touré](#) (Senegal), [Julie Tumbo](#) (Kenya), [Rhonda Schlangen](#) (US), and [Susanna Dilliplane](#) (US).