

From Design to Reality

***What WiL Partners Are Learning About
Institutional Change***

Banking | Economics | Academia | Legal Practice | Judiciary



June 2026

Session Overview

On 24th and 25th June 2026, Women in Leadership (WiL) Partners of Co-Impact came together as part of their Community of Practice (CoP) affinity groups, covering Banking, Economics Academia, Legal Practice, and the Judiciary.

The purpose was consistent across all four sessions: to create a peer learning space where partners working on similar challenges in very different contexts could hear from one another, identify patterns, and strengthen their implementation through shared reflection. These reflections are more than progress reports. They are a window into what it actually looks like to shift systems from the inside, and to advance women's leadership in institutions that were not designed with that goal in mind. This brief shares the lessons and insights gathered across the four sessions.

Key Emerging Lessons

1. The Power of Social Capital: Building the Relational Foundation

One insight cut across all four affinity groups without exception. The ability to move within an institution depends far less on formal protocols than on the quality of relationships already in place. Partners with prior ties to the institutions they were trying to change moved faster, absorbed delays more easily, and recovered from setbacks more effectively.

The Lagos Business School team illustrated this clearly. Their existing relationship with the Nigerian Central Bank governor, and the fact that senior bankers are LBS alumni, meant their governance outreach reached more receptive ground. The question was never just who to write to. It was knowing whose desk it would land on and whether that person already understood why Lagos Business School mattered.

Strathmore University offers an instructive counterpoint. They have been asked to contribute to a promotion policy review but do not yet have a seat at the table where decisions are made. Technical credibility and relational access are not the same thing. Having knowledge about what good policy looks like does not guarantee the standing to shape it. That standing comes from relationships built over time, not from expertise alone.

2. Agility Is a Competency, Not an Emergency Response

Every partner shared a version of the same story. The strategy they entered into implementation with is not the strategy they are currently executing. This is not a sign that planning failed. It is a sign the team was adaptive enough to learn from contact with reality.

Lagos Business School revised their original plan to work through the Nigerian Bankers' Committee, a process taking far too long, and moved instead to direct engagement with individual banks. That pivot produced better results and was

possible because the team was clear on their outcome. As one team member put it, “the enabling factor was not cleverness but focus”.

Expertise Global encountered a more complex version of this. Their intended collaboration with the Kenya Bankers Association (KBA) became complicated as the KBA’s priorities shifted. Noticing strong bank interest in women consumers, the team began exploring a women’s banking network, a structure that did not previously exist in Kenya. This is agility of a more ambitious kind. Not finding a different door to the same room but recognising that a new room may need to be built. However, partners noted that agility needs to be done strategically. In ecosystems where every player is watching, pivoting away from a stakeholder without careful communication can be read as a slight and cost relationships the programme will later need.

3. The Entry Point Is the Message

A consistent lesson emerged about how to make the case for women’s leadership to institutions that do not have an intrinsic commitment to gender equity. Institutional leaders are usually focused on other things: compliance, growth, rankings, efficiency. The question is how creatively partners work with that reality.

Lagos Business School read the Nigerian Central Bank’s Revised Sustainable Banking Principles, which include stronger gender expectations, as an opportunity rather than a constraint. Banks now need to demonstrate progress on gender to meet these regulatory expectations. Lagos Business School positions women’s leadership as a pathway to compliance, thus drawing in banks that might otherwise deprioritise this issue on its own terms.

In the judiciary context, the International Association for Women Judges (IAWJ) found that reform agendas framed as being in everyone’s interest gain more traction than those framed as exclusively in women’s interest. Framing a reform around fairness or efficiency invites broader institutional buy-in than framing it as a women’s issue alone. The argument for transparent judicial appointment processes benefits the justice system as a whole, not only the women within it.

4. Institutionalisation Is the Work, Not the Outcome

Several partners are grappling with the same question: how do you ensure that when the programme ends, the institution is not simply grateful for what happened but actually different in some durable way?

The African Women’s Studies Centre at the University of Nairobi offered the most compelling example. Their work with the university’s ICT department embedded gender-relevant variables across admissions, promotion, HR, and student data systems, so the institution’s commitment no longer depends on a particular programme officer or grant.

Centre for Law & Policy Research (CLPR) in India took a different approach. After establishing a dedicated bar room for women lawyers in the Karnataka High Court, they handed stewardship to the bar association, inviting them to take the credit. The bar association now has a reputational investment in the outcome. This is institutionalisation through strategic generosity. By giving up visible credit, CLPR ensured that the people with the ongoing authority to sustain the bar room also had the ongoing incentive to do so.

5. Community Is a Change Strategy, Not Just a Programme Activity

A theme that reached its fullest expression in the judiciary session was the power of bringing women together. In systems where women in leadership are isolated and carry the weight of navigating resistant institutions largely alone, creating a space where they can see each other is a substantive intervention, not a soft support activity.

CLPR described a March 2026 conference at India's Supreme Court, where women judges, ordinarily constrained by strict rules, were holding hands and sharing stories, expressing visible relief at simply not being alone. One woman described having her family fly in for a swearing-in ceremony, only to learn the day before that her name had been removed from the list without explanation. The shame and secrecy surrounding such experiences mean women who go through them often have no one to tell. A space where those stories can be named, even carefully and privately, matters enormously.

The IAWJ brought a global version of the same insight. Cross-border gatherings of women judges, across pilot countries including Pakistan, Nigeria, South Africa, and the Philippines, generate a kind of courage that internal advocacy alone cannot produce.

Learning, Monitoring & Evaluation: What Partners Are Grappling With

The 'L' Gets the Least Attention

The Migration and Asylum Project (MAP) of Ara Trust in the Legal Practice Affinity Group named this directly. The 'L' in LME is the most recent addition to the acronym and tends to receive the least attention. Monitoring tools are in place, and the evaluation framework is being built, but the learning, the real-time interrogation of what field experience is teaching the team, is not yet captured systematically.

A field coordinator conducting a needs assessment discovered something that fundamentally challenged the design assumption: the women she spoke with had never seen a woman lead in legal aid, and so could not picture it. The insight was significant, but it surfaced in a field conversation, not a dashboard. Without a channel to the design team, it would stay in someone's head.

FIELD INSIGHT | What Partners Want from the LME Lab

- How can the same data points be used across multiple programme interventions, rather than generating separate datasets for each?
- What does credible baseline data look like where institutions do not consistently collect gender-disaggregated data?
- What feedback loops ensure that learning feeds back into design in real time, between baseline and endline?
- What does good organisational LME look like in a technical legal domain, sustained beyond five-year project cycles?

Learning Requires Its Own Architecture

The affinity groups themselves function as one version of a structured learning space, a moment mid-implementation to stop, articulate what is being observed, and let that feed back into each partner's next steps. But these sessions are episodic, not continuous. The Inclusion Economics India Centre (IEIC) named the challenge directly: moving from a research organisation's natural habits of documentation toward the more iterative, responsive learning that implementation requires.

What WiL partners assumed	What they are learning
<i>Institutions will move at the programme's pace</i>	Build in lag time and pipeline partners at different stages
<i>The regulator is primarily a governance partner</i>	The regulator is also a data ally and informal ecosystem nudge
<i>Design-phase strategies will hold</i>	Agility is a core organisational competency, not an emergency response
<i>Communities can vision-cast without role models</i>	Pilot first, then return to ask what communities want more of
<i>Field learning lives in meeting notes</i>	Intentional reflection moments must feed back into programme design
<i>Coalition is a fixed list of partners</i>	Coalition is a living, politically aware set of relationships

Emerging Challenges

Bureaucracy as a Structural Condition

Across all four affinity group sessions, partners described significant time absorbed by institutional processes: MOU negotiations stretching over months, approval cycles with unpredictable timelines, onboarding that varied dramatically by institution. The reality is that the partners are not working on the core business of the institutions they engage. For example, a bank's core business is banking. Anything outside that core is treated as secondary. The

answer partners are arriving at is to build this reality into programme design rather than fight it. This means three things in practice. Cast a wide net of potential institutional partners from the start, rather than relying on one or two. Let institutions come forward and engage at their own pace, rather than forcing a single timeline on all of them. And build a pipeline, with several institutions at different stages of engagement at once, so that no single institution's slowness stalls the programme as a whole.

The Gap Between Public Commitment and Institutional Will

The judiciary group confronted this most directly. The Chief Justice of India made significant public commitments at the March Supreme Court conference on women in the judiciary. Six months on, implementation is not visible. This pattern, verbal commitment under public pressure followed by institutional inertia, is not unique to the judiciary. CLPR's response combines two strategies. Women lawyers are filing petitions on issues like bar room infrastructure and government panel appointments. At the same time, CLPR is building coalitions with actors like the Bar Association of India, whose interest in transparent appointment processes aligns naturally with the goal of gender-equitable appointments.

Internal Capacity for a Different Kind of Work

The Inclusion Economics India Centre named something several partners seemed to be experiencing without yet articulating. Institutional change requires a skill set different from the one most organisation was built around. Research organisations know how to hire researchers. They are less certain what a good programme manager looks like when the work is about relationships, institutional politics, and holding together a theory of change over a long horizon.

Lessons Learned

What Appears to Be Working

- ✚ Bringing sectoral insiders into the team or advisory structure: former bankers, faculty champions, retired judges, who carry relational knowledge external organisations cannot quickly build.
- ✚ Reframing the programme's value proposition in terms of what the institution already cares about: compliance for banks, transparent processes for the judiciary, existing priorities for universities.
- ✚ Pipelining institutions, casting broadly and sequencing engagement so no single institution's delay stalls the programme.
- ✚ Embedding change in institutional systems, data infrastructure, curriculum, administrative forms, rather than building parallel structures dependent on project funding.

- ✚ Creating spaces for women to connect and recognise that an individual experience is often a systemic pattern.
- ✚ Using retired leaders as frontline advocates, drawing on freedoms that sitting leaders do not have.

What Partners Are Learning About Institutional Change

- ✚ Institutions say yes in principle before they know what yes means in practice. Commitment in the design phase often meets friction once specific activities begin.
- ✚ Sequencing matters as much as the ask itself. Incremental alignment with existing institutional work produces deeper engagement than a fully formed external design.
- ✚ Public commitments do not automatically translate into action. Accountability mechanisms, litigation, coalition pressure, media visibility, are part of the strategy, not an alternative to it.
- ✚ Political economy maps must be living documents, updated as priorities shift and people move.
- ✚ The 'L' in LME requires its own dedicated structure. Creating channels from the field to the design team is a strategic necessity, not an administrative detail.
- ✚ Stepping back from ownership, letting a partner take credit for what the programme made possible, can be more effective than insisting on recognition.

Emerging Practices Worth Exploring

Embedding Gender Data in Institutional Administrative Systems

The African Women's Studies Centre at the University of Nairobi worked with the university's ICT department to embed gender-relevant variables directly into core administrative systems. This makes gender visibility a routine feature of how the institution runs, rather than a finding the institution must be persuaded to act on. Conditions for success: a willing technology partner, clarity about which variables matter, and sustained engagement with the staff entering the data.

Building Internal Champions Before Approaching Leadership

J-PAL South Asia found their most productive conversations were with faculty members, not institutional leadership. Those champions then advised on how to approach leadership and which priorities to align with. Conditions for success: genuine enthusiasm from champions, not polite interest, and enough time for the relationship to develop before institutional sign-off is sought.

Piloting Components Before Full Programme Rollout

MAP response to resistance in Delhi State was to identify new states and pilot individual programme components rather than attempting a full rollout in resistant contexts. Treating a technology tool, a research element, or a training module as a pilot generates learning, reduces risk, and gives institutions a lower-stakes first experience. Conditions for success: a genuinely modular design, capacity to manage multiple pilot contexts, and clarity on what each pilot is meant to teach.

Reflections for the Community

These questions are offered as invitations for continued collective reflection as partners continue with their implementation.

- ✚ How do we design programmes that treat relationship-building as a core deliverable rather than a precondition, particularly for partners working as relative outsiders?
 - ✚ What would it take to build learning architecture into our implementation cycles that are as robust as our monitoring systems?
 - ✚ The isolation of senior women leaders surfaced as a significant dynamic in the judiciary group. Is this pattern present in other sectors, and what does the CoP have to offer those navigating it largely alone?
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Looking Ahead

What emerged across these four sessions is a picture of a community learning, honestly and collectively, what institutional change for women's leadership actually requires. Rather than collapsing into frustration where design met the complexity of implementation, partners are observing carefully and sharing what they are learning with peers navigating the same terrain.

The Mombasa in-person convening in September 2026 will be a moment to continue to share and learn. The LME Lab has a ready set of starting questions from the MAP team. The July learning circle on mindset and norms change, co-facilitated with the African Women's Studies Centre, will draw on the experience of a team whose institutionalisation efforts offer both inspiration and practical lessons. The wisdom is already in the room. The task is to ensure it travels.
