WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP
COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In-Person Convening Report

SERENA BEACH RESORT, MOMBASA, KENYA

22 September to 25 September, 2026

Funded by **Co-Impact**
Convened **by Busara Africa**





In Person Convening Overview

The partners of the Women in Leadership (WiL) Community of Practice came together in Mombasa, Kenya from 22nd to 25th September 2026, for their annual in-person convening. Much of the Community's work happens virtually, and these online spaces do a great deal to keep learning going. Coming together in person offers them time together and closeness to build the trust and relationships that make our learning between convenings deeper and more honest. The convening is therefore, first and foremost, a space for connection. It is also a space for learning across regions.

The agenda was shaped by the members themselves. Before the convening, we asked participants in a survey what they most wanted to gain from our time together, and the main sessions were built around the topics they prioritised. This report captures the key insights from those sessions. It is written for those who attended, as a record of what we explored together, and also for partners who could not be with us, so that they can share in the learning and carry the conversations forward in their own work.

Day one grounded the group in the political economy of institutional change and in the mindsets and norms that shape it. Day two turned to partners' own programmes, a panel on what makes change last, and a world café of practical tactics. Day three sharpened how partners measure their progress and communicate what they are learning. Day four turned inward, to the capacity and finances needed to keep this work going, and closed with a look back at the year and ahead to the next.



DAY 1: SEPTEMBER 22, 2026

SESSION 1: Political Economy of Institutional Change

Taaka Awori, the facilitator of the convening, opened with the hardest topic of the day, on purpose: better to tackle political economy while energy was fresh. Political economy refers to how power, incentives, relationships and interests shape what actually happens for women's leadership. The underlying question is therefore what can change, given who holds power and how they use it.

The session built on July's learning circle, which had surfaced two strategies. The first was working with the power holders already in place. This should be done by shifting incentives rather than minds, framing change as good for them and building it into policy so it survives a change in leadership. The second was building power from outside through coalitions, trust, evidence and enough access points that no single door has to open. A survey ahead of the retreat had named three recurring challenges in political economy: leaders who move on before change takes hold, gatekeepers buried in the middle of institutions, and coalitions that are hard to hold together once real power dynamics enter the room.

The session offered a five-step Political Economy Analysis tool that included the following: (1) name the outcome, (2) read the field, (3) map who holds power (including the movable middle), (4) find the leverage, and (5) choose a strategy.

Partners then spent time in their own teams mapping the power around their biggest challenge, before pairing up as each other's strategic advisors.



Plenary Harvest

Five (5) points stood out from the room's plenary harvest.

Trust in a champion is not trust in the institution.

Champions may be fully onboard, but approval sits with decision-makers above them, who have different priorities. Earning that second trust means finding what those decision-makers value and contributing to it, even where it does not directly link to women's leadership on paper.

A broken glass ceiling is a milestone, not a finish line.

It is crucial to get women into key leadership positions (e.g., for the first time in its history, Kenya's judiciary has women in its two most senior positions, Chief Justice and Deputy Chief Justice). However, the harder question is what happens after they retire. Changing the institution itself matters just as much as reaching the top: the systems, cultures and practices that decide who gets mentored, promoted and seen as ready to lead. Without that change, these gains stay tied to a few remarkable individuals, when they should leave behind a pipeline of women ready to step into leadership when the current leaders leave.

Dissatisfaction is a resource.

The people already asking "how are leaders chosen here?" are allies waiting to be organised. Look for ways to present reform as solving a problem they already recognise. Clearer, fairer selection processes benefit everyone who has felt shut out, not only women.

Incentives move institutions that arguments alone cannot.

Awards, recognition and public visibility can be powerful tools for leaders to champion gender equality. They help win early buy-in and keep commitment going over time. But one size does not fit all: what motivates a Senior Public servant, a CEO or an Academic Director will differ, so incentives need to be deliberately tailored to each audience.

Change agents take on real risk.

Those who push reform can pay a political price if it goes badly. That risk is easy to overlook when the focus is on the change itself. Protection has to be planned, through (1) collective voice, so no one stands alone behind a position, and (2) visibility, which makes the champions harder to isolate. Treating their safety as part of the strategy, not an afterthought, is what keeps them willing to lead.

SESSION 2: Changing Mindsets and Norms

The afternoon session also went deeper on an earlier learning circle conversation related to mindsets and norms. Mindsets are the often unspoken beliefs. Norms are the visible patterns and practices those beliefs produce. What we are learning is that the most effective interventions are ones that interrupt both. During the learning circle, six recurring mindsets were discussed:

- There is no pipeline (there aren't enough women coming up)
- Women need to be fixed (she isn't confident enough, rather than the institution being the problem)
- Merit is neutral (our standards are unbiased, so any gap isn't on us)
- A real leader is a lone, assertive hero (women who lead differently are judged "not assertive enough")
- We already have a woman at the top (one visible woman is read as proof the problem is solved)
- Other fires come first (there are too many competing problems for this to be a priority)

New this time was a handout on what the field's research shows about changing mindsets on women's leadership. Five findings were presented: (1) changing the system is often easier than changing a belief; (2) sponsorship moves women further than mentoring, (3) critical mass kicks in around three women or 30%, (4) role models compound, and (5) people hold more equitable views privately than they assume their peers do.

Partners then worked at their own tables. The task was to name two (2) or three (3) mindsets in their context, the norms they produce, and possible strategies. They were encouraged to be honest about what hadn't worked, and the room was named a confidential space to make that possible.



Group Insights

Mindset	Corresponding Norm	Strategy
Leadership is for men	Male leadership is celebrated more.	Build leadership-incubation programmes inside institutions and in public life, so that women's leadership, in more than one style, becomes visible and expected.
A woman who pushes is aggressive, not ambitious	Women who push are penalised and labelled as "too pushy."	Pair mentoring with sponsorship. Mentors help women navigate the double standard. Sponsors are people with power who advocate for women where decisions are made, publicly back their positions, and absorb some of the backlash when they push, which makes assertiveness harder to dismiss. Over time, sponsors can also help shift the norm by naming the double standard when they see it.
A few women in visible roles is enough	Institutions advance a few "safe" women, those unlikely to challenge the status quo, and treat that as progress.	Put gender-sensitive policies in place so that advancement depends on clear, transparent criteria and not on the discretion of gatekeepers, who tend to pick women unlikely to rock the boat. Set targets that go beyond a few visible appointments, and track progress at every level, not just the top. Back this with supporting infrastructure, such as flexible work, care support and leadership development, so that a broad pool of women can compete.
Once a quota is met, the job is done	Appointments are made to reach the number, not to match the candidate to the role, so some are a poor fit.	Build accountability into how promotion policy is carried out, not only into what the policy says. Make specific people responsible for results, track who is appointed and how they perform, and review decisions regularly. Grow a pipeline of qualified women ahead of time, so that quotas are met with candidates suited to the role and not just used to fill seats.

Applying the Day: What Partners Took Away

Three (3) key themes emerged at the end of the day from partners:

- If we can change the system, the mindset will often follow. For example, pushing on structures such as promotion criteria and formal policy are likely to move things faster than pushing on individual beliefs.
- Sponsorship needs to accompany mentorship, not replace it. Mentorship builds confidence but sponsorship opens doors.
- Sustainability must be designed in from the start so no relationship depends on one person.

Next steps ranged from engaging an academic council to finding funding for an idea to reaching out through existing networks, with the same instinct behind them all: leave with something specific to do.



Click **HERE** to hear how Day 1 landed for Antonina Omuse
(Strathmore University Business School)





DAY 2: SEPTEMBER 23, 2026

SESSION 1: Examining Our Women-Focused Programmes

The session started with a poll asking partners how many of them have women-focused programmes as part of their WiL initiatives. Almost every partner said they did and it included a range of mentoring, networking, leadership training and/or fellowships. Two questions were then posed to the room:

- **Does your programme quietly carry the message that under-representation of women in leadership roles is a personal deficiency (e.g., a woman who isn't assertive or skilled enough) rather than a structural one? This was referred to as the deficit trap.**

- **Are you running the high-impact version of your programme, or does it only "look" right but isn't producing the outcome you want?**

Partners were then given an overview of research findings on each type of intervention.

- Individual-focused programmes such as leadership training, confidence-building and coaching risk reinforcing the deficit story unless they run alongside institutional change.
- Mentoring programmes, which close to 80 percent of the room already run, work best when mentors are senior enough to also sponsor and offer visibility alongside advice.
- Networks build solidarity but have high impact only when connected deliberately to gatekeepers.
- Sponsorship works best when sponsors are trained, screened for predatory behaviour, and given a structured relationship with defined career conversations.

- Stretch roles matter because people learn by doing, but the real work is getting gatekeepers to hand them to women and tracking who gets them.

Plenary Insights

After time to reflect and discuss in small groups, partners agreed on five recommendations:

Keep the focus on the system.

Treat the problem as one in the system, not in the women themselves. Involve women in the institution as partners who can sustain change on their own. Help informal groups grow into more organised networks. Track results for individual women and for the institution, not just how many people took part. Design programmes with age, disability and other overlapping identities in mind.

Strengthen mentoring:

Mentors need incentives that go beyond money, such as visibility, reputation and a growing network. Add peer-support networks, a form of group mentoring where women help one another through everyday challenges.

Screen and train sponsors:

First, vet potential sponsors carefully, for example by checking references, so that people who might misuse their position or power over the women they sponsor are kept out. Second, train sponsors to recognise how bias shows up, including their own, before they start advocating for anyone, so their support helps and doesn't do accidental harm.

Connect women focused programmes to the institutions they aim to change.

Women-focused programmes have more impact when they are built with the institutions where participants will advance, not separately from them. This can mean engaging appointing authorities early, often in closed-door conversations, so they are invested in the outcome. It can also mean partnering with mid-level allies already inside who can open opportunities, and bringing in retired women leaders, such as former judges, as mentors who know how the system works and which doors open.



SESSION 2: Creating Lasting Change on Women in Leadership (Panel Discussion)

Partners at every stage are asking the same question: what happens when the project ends, and will the change last? The lesson from the field is not to wait until the end to think about it. As most partners are in their first year, this session sought to draw insights from those further along in their journey.

A panel format provided an opportunity for two newer partners, Jayna Pankaj Kothari (Centre for Law & Policy Research) and Yetunde Anibaba (Lagos Business School) to interview two old partners: Navika Mehta, whose IEA project publishes and amplifies the work of women economists, and Amie Lewis, whose IAWJ project works through national associations of women judges. Having newer partners ask the questions kept the conversation focused on what early-year partners most want to know, and the floor then opened to the room. Five insights stood out.

(1) Expect a slow start, and show progress along the way. Year one is slow for most, and is often spent learning the context and setting up. Traction tends to happen in year three or four. Therefore, it's important to talk openly with donors about why the first year is slow, and treat course corrections as part of learning. Set short-term and long-term goals from the start, so there is something to show early. Track the signs of progress that appear before the headline result, such as an association being treated as a trusted stakeholder, or others republishing your data.

(2) Build ownership into the institution from the start. Change lasts when the institution, and not the project team, carries it. Three approaches have proven to be effective. Work through bodies that already belong to the system, and invest in making them credible voices. Hand the work over early, so it does not depend on one person. Finally, build collective strength, which protects people who would face personal risk speaking up alone.

(3) An outside partner with donor funding and a mandate is never neutral, and what the mandate asks for may not be what the network itself wants. People inside the system have built their careers on its rules, so questioning those rules carries real risk for them. Partners should acknowledge this openly and move at a pace that builds trust. They should start with dialogue, not a ready-made agenda, and think carefully about who is best placed to carry the message, because it is often an insider and not the outside partner. Finally, partners should offer something the network does not already do, so that they are seen as adding value, not competing.

(4) Peer support is underrated. Peers in the same field can share ideas and tips without the intimidation of going back to a mentor again and again. It saves time, helps where mentors are scarce, and can last for years, especially when the group shares a mentor or another connection. It works best when set up with care. Match members deliberately, for example with a short sign-up form, have a mentor lead the group, and clearly explain to members the group is for their benefit.

(5) Build plans that can bend. Changing course is a normal part of institutional change and not a sign of failure. Be willing to pause an idea when the politics are not ready. Use the time to build the data and other reforms that make it easier to return to. Stay open to ideas at the edge of the plan, because some of them become central. Know that change continues beyond the project, so year five is not the finish line.







SESSION 3: Practical Tactics from Partners (World Café)

After the panel, a World Café session was added to the agenda so partners could trade practical tactics for challenges many of them share. Five stations each took one theme, with three prompts that asked partners to describe something they had actually done, not what they would recommend in theory. Participants moved between the stations of their choice and recorded their answers on cards. What follows draws together the strongest recurring tactics, station by station.

(1) Institutional Resistance and Culture Change: Moving an institution from commitment to action usually takes a champion inside it, a case framed around what the institution already wants, and patience. Formal agreements, credible data and a referral from a trusted ally do more than persuasion. But a champion's enthusiasm is not the same as institutional backing. Check that your champion has the standing to speak for the institution, bring in mid-level people as well as senior ones, and repeat the message, since champions forget.

(2) Responding to Articulated Resistance: When someone asks "What about the men?", it is important to broaden the frame. Keep the focus on women while showing that the work benefits everyone. Design it around the barriers women face, use data to make the gap visible, listen to the concern, and bring men in early as allies and champions.

(3) Stakeholder Alignment and the External Environment: To reach a hard-to-reach stakeholder, use relationships: personal networks, referrals and persistence. Treat their administrative staff as allies and not gatekeepers, and explain the purpose of the meeting to them beforehand. To align partners with different goals, start from common ground and add value to their work, which builds trust. In a difficult environment, work with existing calendars and structures instead of against them, and listen first.

(4) The People Inside Institutions as Change Agents: People who drive change from inside an institution usually do it on top of their day jobs, so the work costs them time, credit or money. Involve them in co-creating the plan so they own it. Keep them committed by offsetting the cost: protected time, extra pay where possible, visibility, recognition and co-publication credit. Help them win backing from senior leaders by putting their work in front of those leaders, for example at a summit or a jointly organised event.

(5) Programme Design, Delivery and Measurement: Tailoring one programme across institutions helps keep it manageable. Develop a common menu of options that can be customised locally, often through a shared needs assessment. To make intangible change credible, pair numbers with stories of change, break big outcomes into intermediate indicators (for example, a survey before and after training), and use focus groups or peer evaluation. When delays hit, such as in procurement, use the time to advance other deliverables or to pause and reflect.





End of Day Reflections: What Partners Took Away

Four (4) key ideas stood out at the end of the day:

- Make "high-impact" concrete. Follow a webinar with a separate action checklist. Run a baseline survey upfront so monitoring and evaluation fit the actual cohort rather than being retrofitted. Show an institution how an intervention benefits it, not only the people it serves.
- Open institutional doors deliberately. Use dialogue with retired women judges and attorneys general, and possibly an awards or recognition track for courts.
- Outlast any one person. Leverage workshops to formalise what has stayed informal. Create links with the media. Use a website or group chat as a lasting home for the work.
- Build visibility early. Quality beats quantity. Women need to start building visibility early in their careers rather than trusting the work to speak for itself. For banks, the business case lands best when tied to attracting and retaining women customers.

Fireside Chat with Dr. Thelma Awori: GIMAC and the African Union

Dr. Thelma Awori hosted a fireside chat after dinner, drawing on her work with GIMAC, the Gender Is My Agenda Campaign, and the African women's movement's effort to put women's issues on the African Union's table. The AU was, she said, a boys' club, open only to heads of state until 2005. Women had to act because they bore the costs of conflict while heads of state signed commitments and did little. She took the room through five challenges, each with a lesson.

No seat, no credibility: Women's rights were dismissed as a foreign import. The movement partnered with organisations the AU already trusted and worked through women those organisations had helped place inside it. The lesson: borrow credibility from those who already have it.

Getting into the room: Without badges, the women met at the venue before every summit, sent memoranda and stopped heads of state in hallways. At one election, three took empty seats, and dared the Chair to have them ejected publicly when they were told to leave. He backed down. The lesson: be present, be visible and claim the space.

Understanding the process: A proposal passed through technical experts, permanent representatives, foreign ministers and heads of state, and could take a year. They built allies at every stage, including women ambassadors who briefed their own heads of state. The lesson: learn how decisions are really made, and find allies at every level.

Getting the agenda tabled: As outsiders, they could not table proposals, so they found champions among heads of state. Asked for 30% representation, President Wade of Senegal insisted on parity. The lesson: outsiders need insiders to carry their agenda, so choose champions on evidence, and be ready for a good one to ask for more than you did.

Moving from commitment to action: Commitments were forgotten once heads of state went home. Scorecards, required reporting and an award for the best-performing country, announced at the AU, changed that. The lesson: a policy is the start, not the finish. Keep institutions honest through measurement, visibility and incentives.

A word of caution: Competition for credit and funding strained the movement itself. As such, a coalition needs as much care internally as the institution you are trying to change.







She closed by returning to the three empty seats. "After we took those three empty seats, the AU started checking badges before every closed session. Institutions learn. They close the doors we open, so the work is never finished. Every generation has to find its own empty seat and have the nerve to sit in it. The women before us found theirs. We found ours. Now it is your turn. **Go home and find your empty seat, and when they ask you to leave, don't**."



DAY 3: SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

SESSION 1: LME Clinic with Varja Lipovsek

Varja Lipovsek, Director of Learning, Measurement and Evaluation at Co-Impact, opened with why evidence matters. She explained that it lets you tell a credible story about the problem, how the change happened, and your own initiative's contribution distinct from what others did.

The first audience should be your organisation, then the institutions you are trying to change, and then your funders. Her litmus test was blunt: if you would not use a piece of data to make your own decision, do not collect it. Also, be willing to push back when a funder asks for data that does not serve your work. A credible story draws on several key factors:

- Specific, concrete indicators rather than abstractions like "shifting the patriarchy."
- A baseline, even an imperfect one built in year one.
- Intermediate outcomes that show incremental change.
- Numeric and narrative evidence that can be triangulated.
- Results that are tested against your theory of change, not to prove it right but to see where it breaks.

Partners should also look for disconfirming evidence and be honest about their own contribution. For example, five civil society organisations and several donors each claimed Tanzania's Freedom of Information Act as their own.

There is no one method that is required. Partners can try more complexity-aware (often qualitative) approaches, such as process tracing, contribution analysis, outcome harvesting and outcome mapping. Her closing point: LME is a practice, not a report nobody reads. Organisations that do it well have someone named and responsible. They have an engaged leadership and team, a line in the work plan, and real resourcing, even if only time and tea. The real test is evidence that actually shapes decisions.





Group Insights

Partners then split into three (3) groups, each built around a theme from their own survey questions.

Sharpening Intermediate Outcomes:

- Measure people-level gains such as agency, voice and leadership with surveys at baseline, midline and endline. Pair the survey data with qualitative evidence, such as stories and observations, that helps explain why a shift happened.
- Treat each stage of building a partnership or network as an intermediate outcome, from first contact to formal agreement to joint action, and track these stages on a dashboard flexible enough to adapt as relationships develop.
- Be transparent about what the data can and cannot show.
- Earn access to institutions' data by building a consistent record of protecting confidentiality.
- Distinguish outcome from impact. An intervention may contribute to an outcome, such as more women reaching the judiciary, while the broader impact, such as greater access to justice for women and girls, can be pointed to but rarely measured directly. Tell that larger story honestly, without overclaiming.
- Revisit the learning, measurement and evaluation (LME) plan every year.

Strengthening Institutions' Own Data Practice

- Advocate for access to the compliance and regulatory data that institutions already hold.
- Reassure institutions about how their data will be protected, including encryption, de-identification, clear limits on who it is shared with, and formal data-sharing agreements.
- Build data systems with an institution, not around it. This means securing dedicated resources, bringing in outside consultants where needed, and getting buy-in from the top.
- Make data collection worth the institution's while. A bank will collect better data if it sees a larger customer base in it, and a regulated institution will do so if compliance depends on it.
- Where data exists but sits unused, ask why. Is no one using it or pushing for it? Is it not formally anyone's job? Is there no budget? Each answer points to a different fix.

Strengthening Partners' Own LME Practice

- Treat learning as continuous. Set a baseline, record small milestones, and pause regularly to check whether real improvement is happening.
- Treat leadership buy-in as a precondition. Secure it actively by giving leaders the evidence that gets them invested, not by waiting for them to come round.
- Build structure around LME. Where resources allow, set up a dedicated data team. Use a dashboard to track progress over time, and hold regular stand-ups as well as dedicated pause-and-reflect sessions.
- Motivate people to use the data. Be honest about response rates, show what has changed as a result of feedback, and celebrate small wins.
- Explain findings in plain language and simple visuals that any stakeholder can follow, not in technical charts. This is especially important for engaging leaders.







SESSION 2: Communicating with the Field: What We Know the Field Needs to Hear

The session began by recognising that the field of institutional change for women's leadership is still being written, and mostly by people who are not doing the work. Much of what exists also leans on a deficit story that focuses on fixing women rather than the institutions around them. Members of this CoP hold something that story misses: ground-level knowledge of what actually moves a judiciary, a bank, a university or a law firm from the inside. That knowledge is easily lost when partners are busy implementing. The session therefore opened with a challenge. Partners almost certainly already have insights worth sharing, so how can they surface them and bring them to the field?

Mining the Insight

The aim of this exercise was to help partners surface insights they already hold but rarely put into words, because they are busy doing the work. Partners first reflected individually on prompts such as What do you now believe that you didn't a year ago? and What do you keep having to explain to people outside this work?

They then shared and built on their reflections in pairs, and then in small groups, refining their ideas at each step. Each insight was tested against a simple filter. Does it travel beyond your own context? Does it challenge a common assumption? Or is it simply a description of what you did? Only insights that passed the first two tests went forward.

In a final plenary, the groups brought out the sharpest insights, which became the raw material for communicating with the field.

What the Room Surfaced

Below are some of the insights that emerged from this process. Each one reflects something partners have learned through doing the work, not just what they did.

Budgeting for learning cannot be an afterthought.

Partners found that LME budgeting work best when they are built in from day one, with outside support brought in early. Plans should also leave room to adjust both the approach and the pace as learning comes in, because change in institutions rarely goes to plan.

Systems change has a language barrier, and peers lower it.

Systems-change vocabulary is not intuitive to everyone, and admitting "I don't understand this" takes a level of comfort that is easier to find with a peer than with a funder or expert. A deliberate buddy system, pairing new partners with someone who has already been through the process, can make that learning faster and safer.

Words can close doors before the work begins.

Loaded language provokes resistance. "Institutional change" can sound like a challenge to whoever leads the institution, and "feminism" can raise suspicion of a hidden agenda. Partners have found more traction by framing the work around a benefit everyone can see and by investing in the slower relational work before asking for anything.

Change that depends on one person is fragile.

No one stays in a role forever, so sustaining change means planning for succession from the start. That means creating opportunities to share leadership and knowledge across teams, and documenting failures as well as successes so the experience outlasts the people who gained it.

Gender-neutral is not neutral.

Treating "gender-neutral" as the safe design default overlooks the fact that women start from accumulated disadvantage. Equal treatment is therefore not the same as equitable treatment, and programmes need to be designed for equity from the outset.



Channels and What to Share

The session then turned from what partners have to say to how they say it, looking at the channels partners already use to share their work with the field and what makes them effective.

Partners already use a broad range of channels to share information. This includes microsites on institutional websites, media interviews timed to project milestones, social media, journals, newsletters, opinion pieces and comments on legislation. Several attach their work to convenings that already exist, such as a national education summit or a project launch timed to draw in regulators. The common thread: personalise the evidence, use real stories to build allies where the work is politically sensitive, and partner with larger platforms to extend reach.

One open question was how much to share publicly before an initiative is fully underway, since naming target institutions can invite requests from those left out. The recommendation was to work with the institution and let it take the credit. Channels work best inside a deliberate strategy, with audience and goal named first.





DAY 4: SEPTEMBER 25, 2026

SESSION 1: Capacity to Deliver: Team Design for Institutional Change

Taaka opened by naming a shift many partners were already feeling. Delivering a programme you control is one kind of work, and moving an institution you don't control is quite another. Rigorous research and technical expertise can earn a seat at the table, but getting an institution to act on good evidence takes different skills: political judgement, relationship building, negotiation, and persistence through resistance and backlash, often exercised through champions you can influence but never fully manage. Few of these skills appear in a job description, and they are hard to recruit for. Partners were then asked to discuss four key questions:

1. What skill did you not see coming?
2. What capability would have changed the outcome when good evidence still stalled?
3. What has helped you to maintain quality when coaching an institution rather than controlling the work?
4. How do you close a capability gap: hire, partner, or borrow expertise from your board?

The following are the key skills that surfaced from the room:

Skill 1: Handling Scepticism

Several partners said that sceptical audiences, particularly academic ones, tend to question the method behind a finding before they engage with the finding itself. The skill here is less about having better data than about how you handle the exchange. It means being open to scrutiny instead of becoming defensive, and being able to tell the same story differently to a university partner, a donor or a government official. At one workshop, a professor challenged the source of some interview data on the spot. What resolved it was not a better citation. The interviewees, who were themselves from the university, were in the room and could vouch for the work, and the scepticism faded once the evidence came from inside the institution.

Skill 2: Reading the Room

A signed MOU is not the same as real commitment. Partners stressed the importance of reading what people actually want, not just what they agree to on paper. Much of the real movement happens through informal channels, such as a quiet tip from a trusted contact or a relationship maintained for its own sake rather than for a specific ask.

Skill 3: Negotiation

Negotiation came up at two levels. One was practical, in matters such as per diem rates. The other was strategic: navigating institutional politics with integrity, without being drawn into power games.

Skill 4: Managing Ego

Sometimes the best person to deliver a message is not you, but a junior colleague with better rapport or a coalition member with more credibility. Stepping back takes discipline and humility. At the organisational level, competition over whose name is attached to an achievement can strain the very partnerships that make change possible. Dr. Thelma Awori illustrated this with an account of competition within the Maputo Protocol coalition.

Skill 5: Working Around Quiet Resistance

Resistance inside institutions rarely says no out loud. Things simply stall. The skill is to keep the work moving without confronting resistance head-on, which takes both persistence and the agility to find another route. Partners identified three moves that help:

- Frame the change in terms of the institution's own rules, so that it reads as compliance and not as a challenge.
- Give it a senior line of reporting, so it is protected from the top.
- Design the process so that no one visibly loses.

Closing the Capability Gap

The last of the four questions asked how to close a capability gap: hire, partner, or borrow. Partners favoured three routes, and each one supports the skills above.

(1) Build them in-house.

Reading the room, negotiating and working around quiet resistance depend on relationships and judgement that only people who stay can develop. Consultants suit a specific, bounded need, such as a technical task, but they do not carry the same long-term commitment. In-house expertise, especially in LME, is the more durable investment.

(2) Partner for what you cannot build.

Specialist or regional organisations bring expertise and networks that are hard to find directly. They can also supply the credible voice. This can be through a trusted coalition member delivering a hard message (Skill #4) or people from inside the institution vouching for your work (Skill #1).

(3) Protect the people who hold these skills.

Internal champions and senior sponsors give the team cover when resistance is quiet and persistent (Skill #5). Gender-focused work meets regular resistance, so partners also stressed protecting team morale deliberately.

One idea to consider is a shared, crowdsourced resource where partners contribute the tools, agendas and approaches they have used to build their own capacity, so that no team has to build these skills alone.



SESSION 2: Fundraising for Sustainability and Impact

This session turned the focus to resourcing the slow, hard-to-measure work of institutional change. What partners need is not always money; sometimes it is social capital, credibility or an introduction. Five (5) open-space stations followed, each focused on a different fundraising challenge. Participants were invited to visit any two stations. The insights from each station are below.

- **Making the Case for Slow, Uncertain Work**

  Institutional change takes time, and its results are hard to predict, which makes it a difficult sell to funders looking for clear returns. Partners shared how they bridge that gap. Before deep change becomes visible, they build credibility through stories and testimonials, short-term milestones and documented partnerships that show the work is gaining ground. Getting in the door still depends largely on existing connections and institutional credibility. Once there, a clear ask broken into specific, manageable parts lands better than a broad appeal. On the practical side, assigning someone to track grant cycles and deadlines helps make sure opportunities are not missed.

- **Organising Resource Mobilisation**

  In practice, fundraising is rarely done by a dedicated team. It usually rests on the founder or executive director, which leaves the organisation exposed if that person moves on or becomes unavailable. Partners saw two ways to reduce this risk. The first is to build fundraising capacity across the team: train more staff, and give both new and long-serving colleagues the chance to learn by observing and supporting fundraising events and donor meetings before they take the lead. The second is to find fundraising models that depend less on one person. One idea drew real energy: selling sponsorship or exhibition space at events and seminars, a model borrowed from corporate conferences.

- **Strategic Coherence versus Donor Drift**

  Partners largely agreed on a simple test. If you change how you work but keep your goal and the people you serve intact, that is adaptation. If funding starts to change what you are trying to achieve or who you are trying to reach, that is drift. Partners named two common warning signs. One is a pattern of many small grants, each with its own conditions, which can gradually pull an organisation in several directions. The other is funding that rewards numbers reached over outcomes achieved. Two safeguards help. First, give someone, such as the LME lead, clear standing to name drift as soon as it begins. Second, anchor decisions in something written down in advance, such as the organisation's values or theory of change, so that saying no to a funder rests on agreed principles and not on personal judgement.

- **Resources within Our Own Institutions**

  Partners agreed there are resources within their own institutions that can also be leveraged. For example, university-based partners quantified internal resources their institutions already hold: faculty time, facilities, security, logistics, alumni networks. What is key is to tie the work to something the institution values. Then, offer to conduct a pilot to show proof of concept. Decision making may be slower and there may be some loss of independence, but the focus should remain on the desired outcomes.

- **Stewarding Funders Beyond the Initial Commitment**

  Renewal should never be a scramble. Start preparing early. Name someone to identify new funders. Stay visible even when a grant cycle is quiet. Regular check-ins keep communication lines open, and when something goes wrong mid-grant, early honesty costs less than managing a funder's surprise later. Transparency is the foundation of a genuine partnership. Annual reporting should work like a performance review – no surprises.



CLOSING: Looking Back, Looking Ahead

The closing session began with an accounting of what the CoP had delivered over the year, measured against what had been promised. Of four planned pillars, three ran.

- Learning circles covered political economy, strategic partnerships, the strategic use of data for institutional change, and the shift from mindsets to norms. There was also one built from a partner's own field insights.
- Affinity groups each met twice. They were grouped by discipline: legal practice, law academia and judiciary on one side, economics and banking on the other.
- Knowledge products followed a deliberate structure wherever possible: a conceptual piece, a practical toolkit, and a case study from partners who had done the work.

The fourth pillar, organisational labs, is scheduled to take place over the coming months. These are a deeper alternative to the learning circles, with four sessions on one topic with the same small group. Partners were asked to confirm whether it was still worth pursuing, and which topics would be most relevant.



Priorities for the Year Ahead

Three themes emerged from partners on what would be most helpful in the coming year.

- **A buddy or mentorship system:** Proposed designs include pairing a first-year partner with a fifth-year one, pairing by shared challenge rather than tenure, or pairing around a specific skill like LME.
- **Practice-based skill-building:** Recommendations include practicum-style sessions, where a real, current problem is presented and worked through with peers. Partners also request expert input on skills that don't sit naturally inside every organisation. This includes fundraising, communications, negotiation, navigating institutional politics, and turning partners' existing data into a usable story. Fundraising was framed as a sustainability need, so the work doesn't stall when the convenor's own funding ends.
- **More structured collaboration:** Partners want collaboration spaces distinct from the affinity groups. They also request shared onboarding materials so that new hires across partners start with a common understanding of gender-intentional work.

Two (2) additional ideas were floated:

- Better equipping male allies rather than simply naming them as champions.
- Inviting a senior government figure (e.g., a minister or cabinet secretary for gender affairs) to open future convenings in the host country.

The buddy system and more structured collaboration were the ideas that landed with the most energy. Partners were assured they would receive a more concrete proposal once the team had thought it through.



A Few Voices from the Year

A short survey after each session, and a longer one at the end of the convening, gave partners a direct channel to say what had changed for them. Below are a few in their own words:

> "What I found most useful was learning about experiences from other countries. This has helped broaden my experience."

> "We particularly loved the idea of creating a monthly newsletter specifically for funders, highlighting our achievements, milestones, and progress toward impact. We are already exploring how to implement it."

> "It has made an enormous difference. We have realised that, despite our different contexts, we are all navigating similar struggles and working toward a shared vision of change. In many ways, it felt like finding a family."

Closing

After four days that moved from political economy to mindsets, and from LME clinics to fundraising, the convening ended in its simplest form. Partners gathered in one group for a closing council, with their devices put away. There was no agenda to complete and nothing to produce. There was only a final round of reflection on the journey they had shared, and a moment to sit with what the week had meant before heading home.



Click HERE to see a collection of photos capturing our convening

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