




AFRICAN WOMEN'S
DEVELOPMENT FUND

Colours and Brushstrokes:

*Paths to the African
Feminist Knowledge Circles*



“Through the knowledge circles we are able to put together our narratives in a safe space and learning environment where we don’t talk of what is right or wrong but rather realities.”

Sandra Zenda, Institute of Young Women development, Zimbabwe

Invitation to the dream

In 2022, AWDF witnessed growth in attacks and backlash against feminist politics and organising. Well-resourced pockets of antagonists used knowledge and voice to mount threats on the safety of African women and gender-diverse people in physical and digital organising spaces. From Ghana to Uganda, national policies and laws that perpetuate anti-feminist and women rights rhetoric took centre-stage further shrinking platforms to connect for millions across the continent.

Informed by what we were listening to from the movement through the strategy consultations AWDF dreamt of safe, well resourced organising that offers long-term redress to the activism fatigue we saw. Organising that grounds feminist politics and refreshes many of the gender equality dream we all share. Organising that celebrates the innovation, the tools and the voice of often excluded groups. In what ways can AWDF resource African feminists and gender-diverse people to reimagine and lead organising in futures that are rife with state-funded backlash, shrinking funding pockets, new audiences and champions within the movements and new tools and platforms at the disposal of feminists?

The consultative approach in developing the Lemlem allowed AWDF teams to test ideas and stretch their dreams as we listened, learned and drafted our future plans. One such idea was the African feminist knowledge circles, birthed out of the AWDF Programmes Manifesto as part of reimagining transformative ways to resourcing, nurturing and amplifying the diverse narratives of African feminists and gender-diverse people.

The African feminist knowledge circles are an evolving space where African feminists convene their identities, stories, tools, politics and approaches from their many journeys of challenging the patriarchy. Here, they connect, share, learn, reignite their passion and rethink strategies. The circles are iterative and centre partner-led reflection in co-creating practice-based knowledge, learning and grounding feminist politics. AWDF's key roles are resourcing, convener and amplifier, enabling the active spotlighting of grantee and non-grantee partners who lead the circle activities. Partner roles include chairing the circles, leading content identification and guiding the design of each unique circle. Tested in virtual and physical spaces, the circles have emerged as a bilingual platform that nurtures and models African feminist knowledge, resources, creativity and innovation and celebrates voice and the diverse narratives of African feminists.

AWDF collaborated with grantee partners from Uganda, Zimbabwe, Palestine, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana to co-create the African feminist knowledge circles. This brief highlights AWDF's experiences in piloting the African feminist knowledge circles. It showcases the process and lessons learnt as we continue to explore spaces, tools and approaches to resource collective feminist knowledge creation, application and learning.

Embarking on the journey

SKETCHING THE IDEAS: HOW IT STARTED

The AWDF strategy review process sparked continued conversations about the operational context and implications for different components of the organisation's work. One of the critical issues for knowledge was exploring creative ways to nurture and strengthen movement-led creation, exchange and application of feminist knowledge and evidence. Aware of the context, we started to sketch ideas – essentially listening to the movement voices highlighted in the AWDF strategy consultations to redefine what we understood the problem to be. We drafted out the major steps for the circles' establishment and mapped internal departments to collaboratively expand our thinking of what the problem looked like, felt, manifested as on one hand and how the knowledge circles could support solution-building.

We understood this first step to be an open market for testing ideas and processes – the very-identity of the circles would organically evolve with the steering of the grantee partners and individual activists who would co-facilitate the circles activities. We valued that across the resourcing and the knowledge and voice, there was deeper clarity on what the movements wanted to achieve around knowledge and feminist learning. This enabled us to interrogate the circles model to make it transformative in how it sought to address the gaps.

Some questions we continually reflected on at this stage

- 1. What are the critical problems in feminist knowledge organising within the movement?**
- 2. What do we understand the circles to be and what do we envision them to achieve in relation to the problem in the movements?**
- 3. What nature of content are we looking at?**

EXPOUNDING THE IDEAS: THE MORE, THE CLEARER

With a sketched out concept note, we were ready to share this idea without waiting for things to get finer. This was deliberate as we needed and sought to enrich the concept with additional ideas from other internal team members, primarily the resourcing unit's Team Learning Officer and the Director of Programmes. The process felt complex and what helped was to approach it as a pilot to test small aspects of the circles and evolve as we learn.

The pilot approach enabled flexibility from the initial design. For instance, our vision was for grantee and non-grantee partners to lead the circles from the onset. Through collective reflections, we learned that this required patience and clarity of the vision and milestones to offer the partners the basic information and tools to lead the process. Most partners did not know each other and AWDF had to play a facilitator role in the initial stages to make the necessary connections. We started with a relatively clear piece of content and with a small number of grantee partners to kickstart the circles.

Some questions we continually reflected on at this stage

1. **What principles espouse the spirit we envision the African feminist knowledge circles to carry?**
2. **How will membership or participation in the circles be defined?**
3. **What are AWDF's roles and what are partner roles in the circles?**

Principles of the African feminist knowledge circles

Mindfulness:

Aware of the power dynamic we bring to the space as a funder and convener. Therefore, we commit to ensuring that engagement in the knowledge circles is partner-led and most importantly, that all partners are equally heard, seen, respected and involved in the circles activities.

Co-leadership:

Engagement in the circles will be conceptualised and co-led by partners to foster collective decision making and active participation. Role clarity will continually be espoused to ensure partners are clear of expectations, unique value addition of individuals and the collective and various tools and formats explored to equip participants to co-lead.

At this stage, it is useful to have a relatively clearer concept note that describes the vision, the people, the process, the content and the tools. A working level of clarity on the roles of AWDF and the roles of the partners was critical. While everything was still building up, we observed that internal colleagues appreciated a sense of clarity to enable them collectively contribute to enriching the initiative. We were ready to share the vision with the small group of grantee partners. We were excited and anxious!

ROLLING OUT: IMPLEMENTING THE CIRCLES

Co-leaders' consultative session

AWDF convened the first partner consultative session for the Circles in April 2022. We started with existing content - two case studies from the Leading From the South (LFS) programme on Promoting women's participation and leadership and Influencing gender-responsive laws and policies. The case studies feature nine partners in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Uganda, Togo, Palestine, South Africa, Ghana and Tanzania and offer practice-based insights critical for partner learning. Four partners expressed interest and availability – they are the Integrated Disability Women's Activities (Uganda), Mothers School Society (Palestine), ABANTU (Ghana) and Institute for Young Women's Development (Zimbabwe) and they formed the small group involved in the first consultative session.

At the consultative session, the four partners were introduced to the circles and they provided thought into further refining the model, mainly, reflecting on the content and mapping themes from the case studies. The four partners also volunteered to serve as co-leads for the pilot phase. Their roles included refining the circles' content of focus, lead discussion on specific content themes with other partners and generally, chair and direct the circles sessions. Three themes identified from the case studies were 1) reflections on advancing self-care, 2) experiences on coalition building and 3) resource mobilisation in advocacy for leadership and participation.

This was one of the most delicate steps in the circles' co-creation process. All four partners were meeting each other for the first time. Individually, they each had excitement and fears. For instance, they did not know where each partner was on their feminist journeys and implications of this to their first interface. It was useful that we had great clarity of the vision and principles of the circles prior to this stage - it enhanced partner trust. Presenting the circles as evolving emboldened partners to rethink and change things in ways they loved to structure and co-lead. They effortlessly identified points of similarity in their work and that of others and formed connections that enriched the co-leadership. For instance, proactively, Abantu for Development (Ghana) and the Institute for Young Women's Development (Zimbabwe) observed the need to co-lead the coalition building theme to deepen cross context learning in their work!

Tools to help collective reflection:

Icebreakers like 'Rose, Bud and Thorn' facilitated introductions and allowed everyone to share how they recently felt about themselves, their work and their community.

Google Jamboard, Mentimeter and Google forms.

Preparing for the circles launch: Taking a back-step

A follow up discussion was held for co-facilitators to review the previously agreed-upon themes, and to clarify the objectives and structure of the first open knowledge circles session with more partners in the space. Using interactive platforms like WhatsApp eased coordination for co-facilitators. We found that they had gone ahead to reach out to each other on their own.

Achievement highlight

Abantu – Ghana and the Institute for Young Women’s Development – Zimbabwe had volunteered to co-lead the coalition building theme. We learnt that they had proactively set up a WhatsApp group to start planning on the different perspectives from their individual work, context and the continent broadly. We were thrilled to see more co-leaders from the small group do cross-collaboration among themselves without waiting or having to go through AWDF.

Pivoting as we go along

- We observed that AWDF’s role had started shifting from convener and facilitator to listener and resourcing. With partners directly connecting, some of the major ask on us were tools that could facilitate collaboration and listening to learn from the many perspectives that co-facilitators brought to light.
- The co-leaders had reflected on being at different feminist journeys. They suggested inviting an expert feminist partner to facilitate integration of feminist politics especially around knowledge organising. In consultation with the co-leaders, Raising Voices was invited to the launch to facilitate a session on feminist consciousness in building practice-based knowledge and learning.
- To allow for learning as we went along, the co-leaders guided AWDF to start with a small audience for the launch of the circles. This culminated into a launch that reached 60 participants pooled from past and present grantee partners under the Leading From the South partnership.



Launching the African Feminist Knowledge Circles

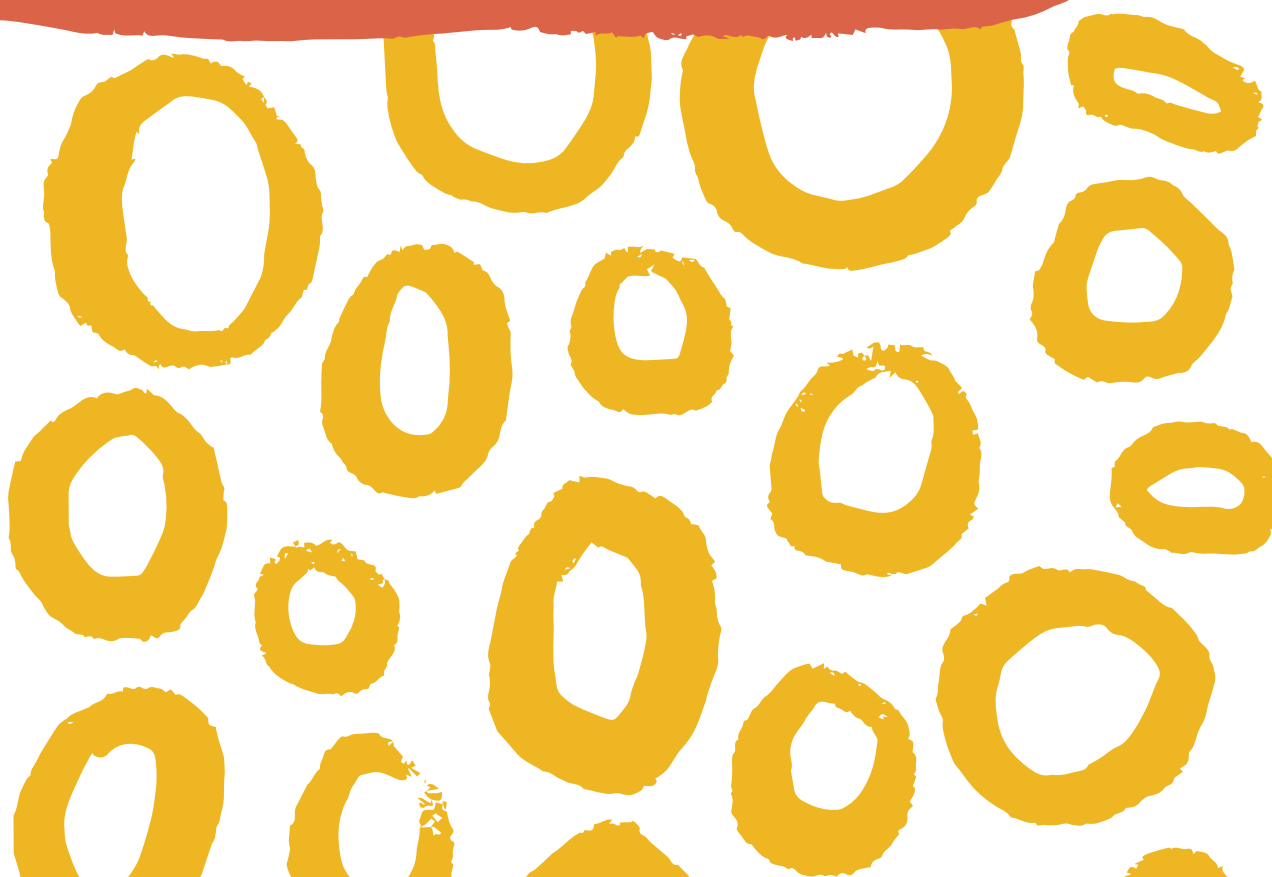
“The knowledge circles present a critical opportunity for stakeholders to learn and share from the experiences and strategies used by other countries, for enhancing advocacy initiatives towards the promotion of women’s rights.”

- Grace Ampomaa, ABANTU for Development, co-leader

After two months of conceptualisation and pulling the circles’ infrastructure together, we launched the circles in a virtual interactive workshop co-led by the four grantee partners in June 2022. The audience was 60 participants from past and present grantee partners under the Leading From the South partnership. The LFS group of audience easily connected with the case studies learning themes presented. However, in their post-reflections the co-leaders felt it was limiting and wondered how to bring more and less homogeneous voices on board in subsequent circles.

Achievement highlight

Co-facilitators used varied approaches to innovatively showcase their experiences and exercised discretion to enrich learning. The coalition building experiences from Ghana and Zimbabwe shared by Abantu and IYWD inspired the Uganda-based partner IDIWA. During the session, IDIWA proactively dropped the resource mobilisation theme based on their judgement that the Ghana and Zimbabwe insights on coalition building could be enriched by comparative insights from Uganda- and thus, they shifted their focus to this. We loved that the co-leaders were boldly taking up the space and working with audience reflections to restructure the circles format focusing more on the outcomes.





HOW PARTNERS DESCRIBED THE CIRCLES' EXPERIENCE

In a post-launch survey, we asked participants to share their thoughts on the knowledge circles model and the launch experience.

The most highlighted areas included the need to continue conversations on power, feminist politics and learning such as the one steered by Raising Voices.

The co-leaders reflected on the agency resourced by the circles in enabling them to lead the circles' sessions, direct the content and conversations, and the networking to further connect participants to their work.

Participants were keen to see the circles grow into a space for innovation beyond "just sharing experiences". For instance, one suggestion was to collectively identify and review selected models and then to have co-facilitators work with interested partners to adapt such models in their own organisations and contexts. A specific example was the self-care and psychosocial support approach by Mothers School Society – Palestine which participants felt was less documented while it could be replicated beyond the Middle East to fragile contexts on the continent.



The circles in a physical space

“We had the freedom to express ourselves and share knowledge without fear of being judged.”

Mercy Majachani, Family Support Trust – non grantee partner

In September 2022, AWDF resourced the convening of the first physical knowledge circles at the Sexual Violence Research Initiative Forum in Mexico. Three co-facilitators namely; Abantu for Development – Ghana, Association Stop Au Chat Noir – Côte d’Ivoire and the Mothers School Society – Palestine moderated the circles’ conversations centring two themes, namely, self-care and coalition building.

This was a significant step in the pilot as we not only moved from virtual spaces into the physical but expanded the circles to integrated non-AWDF grantee partners building on the post-launch reflections.

The original co-leaders of the circles inducted and offered reflective insights to newer co-facilitators with minimal input from AWDF.

“Excellent! It allowed meeting different people, different experiences, new learning and forming communication networks.”

Maria de Lourdes Goncalves, Universidade Pública de Cape Verde.

AWDF is excited about the potential for continued deliberate knowledge exchange, experiential learning and networking led by partners. Through the pilot, we co-created several tools and curated a structure that enables us to resource partners and individual activists to drive engagement that showcases their leadership and innovation.

The participants and co-leaders appreciated the knowledge circles and there was a desire for more engagements and interactive sessions.

“I would love to see the circles grow into a broad platform that is organised annually to bring together grantees, and other partners to share experience and learning, to jointly address challenges and plan for the future interventions.”

Edith Wamwenderaki, Integrated Disabled Women Activities

Beyond the pilot phase: *Lessons into the future*

- Bring more non-grantee partner voices into the circles. Individual activists, artists, creatives, cultural and indigenous knowledge creators, tools, and nuance.

- Maximise the expertise, insight and thought from external facilitators to enrich perspectives and maintain the focus of the specific circles and in line with the LemLem knowledge, voice and solidary and care outcomes

- Be keen on the needs of the programmatic outcome circles that nurture and resource practice-based knowledge and those of feminist consciousness building, solidarity, care and politics grounding circles and across board, remain intentional to integrate playfulness, creativity, art, diversity of voice, orientation and spirit.

- Identify and resource circle opportunities for issue-based convening and learning that is specific to groups within the movement and within AWDF-resourced partners.