

STRENGTHENING THE MARKETPLACE FOR GENDER EQUALITY GIVING

Executive Summary

Investing in women and girls yields extraordinary social and economic returns—up to 4,000% in some cases—yet remains severely underfunded. Despite the high impact of these investments, less than 2% of U.S. philanthropic dollars support gender-focused work. This report explores how behavioral barriers may suppress giving to gender equality and outlines ideas42’s learnings from an attempt to unlock funding for high-quality, underfunded organizations in the sector.

ideas42 tested a strategy to help bridge the gap in philanthropic funding for gender equality by making competition finalists more accessible to high-net-worth (HNW) donors via philanthropic advisors. We built two versions of lists of these opportunities for advisors, then collected feedback and learnings on usage. While we hoped that this approach could help overcome behavioral barriers through strategic packaging, accessible language, and the use of advisors as trusted intermediaries, we saw little productive engagement.

Nonetheless, this effort generated useful insights on:

- How **the packaging of “gender equality” opportunities** might impact interest (page 8)
- How **advisors source and screen opportunities** for donors (page 11)
- How **application data from submissions** to competitive funding calls could be put to use to benefit organizations and the field overall, beyond the direct sharing of “finalists” with potential funders (page 14)

We hope that these insights can help drive other successful efforts to unlocking more investment in initiatives that advance gender equality.

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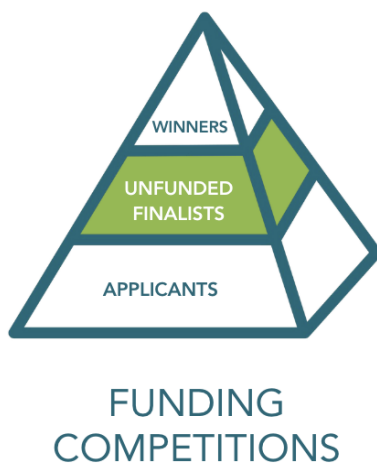
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The Opportunity—and the Gap

Gender equality boosts outcomes for everyone. Economically, socially, globally—philanthropic investing in women and girls yields high returns. Due to lack of access to financial services, women-owned enterprises of all sizes are underfunded to the tune of [\\$1.7 trillion](#); closing this credit gap for women would result in a [12% average increase](#) in income across *all genders* by 2030. CARE, an organization dedicated to addressing root causes of poverty through the empowerment of women, has reported that every \$1 invested in their savings groups yields \$9-\$18 in women’s income, a whopping 900%-1,800% [return on investment](#). Furthermore, research has found that investment in women’s health yields a [4,000% economic return](#) for her community. Wall Street could only dream of returns like these. Investing in gender is not just high impact, it’s a win for everyone.

And yet, of the \$550bn that American donors gave away in 2024, [less than 2%](#) of that went to women’s and girls’ issues. These fundraising challenges persist globally and the effects are measurable—the “Gender Equality” Strategic Development Goal from the United Nations has only achieved [15.4% of its indicators of progress](#) halfway through the measurement period. It’s clear that organizations supporting women and girls need more funding, especially in the Global South, where there is potential for transformative change.



There have been many targeted philanthropic efforts to invest in women and girls. Recently, several have used competition models to unearth and support organizations across the globe, like Co-Impact’s Gender Fund ([now a closed application process](#)) and the [Equality Can’t Wait Challenge](#) run by Lever for Change. Winning organizations receive significant investments, but many other organizations with compelling and effective approaches to advancing gender equality do not make the final cut. Both competitions produce lists of these top tier finalist organizations and try to encourage investment by individual donors and funders.

However, interest in even these unfunded finalists has been limited. Vetted, high quality giving opportunities like those unfunded finalists should draw strong donor interest—especially from individual high-net worth donors with impact-driven giving strategies. Nonetheless, the funding gap persists.

A behavioral lens can help us understand why—and offer insights for potential solutions.

Behavioral Barriers in Philanthropy

Donors don't always give where it matters most.

Across the donor journey and at all levels of generosity, common behavioral themes emerge. These factors can limit generosity and meaningful impact for donors, and lead to suboptimal funding for organizations doing critical work. Some key barriers:

Crowded attention space: Donors, like all humans, have [limited attention](#) and field research suggests that organizations should aim for [7+ contacts](#) before an initial donation. Well-known organizations with big marketing budgets, or connections to wealthy individuals, are better able to capture that attention and solicit gifts. For example, St. Jude's fundraising organization [spent over \\$350 million in 2022, and raised more than \\$2 billion](#), including [\\$243 million from a SpaceX flight](#) for charity. It's hard to compete with spaceships, or the famous [Ice Bucket Challenge](#). And beyond marketing, donors often discover new organizations via their networks of family, friends, and colleagues.

Too many choices: Globally, there are more than 10 million global nonprofit organizations (and at least 1.8 million in the US alone). All these options can [make it hard to choose](#), leading donors to procrastinate, default to familiar organizations and causes, or not donate at all.

Outcomes are hard to measure: Solving social issues is complex and takes time; measuring impact is difficult. As a result, [donors must trust organizations](#), a process that may require significant research and vetting. Donors may find [impact stories](#) to be more compelling than data alone.

Emotional connection plays a big role: Donors often seek giving opportunities that resonate with their values and personal experiences. Whether explicitly or not, [identity informs giving](#).

When it comes to giving to women and girls, and across borders, the potential barriers stack up: organizations focused on gender equality may be overlooked, compared to more prominent (and US-based) nonprofits. International work may feel more complex and harder to understand (and vet) for donors based in other countries. Gender equality work (especially advocacy) can feel confusing, and

outcomes difficult to measure. Jargon may add to the opacity and sense of risk. And, if donors gravitate towards causes they identify with (or away from organizations that feel less relevant to them), gender-specific dynamics may shape who feels connected to and compelled by this work—no matter how effective it may be.

As a result of these challenges, even high-quality, vetted, and trustworthy giving opportunities, like those sourced and curated by Co-Impact or Lever for Change, may struggle to gain individual donor interest and investment. By finding strategies to address these psychological challenges, we may be able to unlock more philanthropic investment in women and girls.

Applying Behavioral Strategies to Address this Gap

We took a behavioral lens to this challenge: Can we find strategies to address these barriers and match high-capacity donors more effectively with high-quality organizations advancing gender equality? We focused on the concept of repurposing the "runners-up" applicants (or "unfunded finalists") to an open funding call focused on women and girls' causes. These applicants are strong, but not the right fit for that competition's set of criteria and full funding award.¹

As the popularity of open call competition models continues to grow, a solution to this challenge could be significant—solving for a market inefficiency by driving available philanthropic capital to impactful but unseen giving opportunities.² We hoped to leverage advisors as intermediary channels to reach HNW donors who were interested in being more strategic in their giving.

¹ Open calls draw a wide swath of organizations: large and small, those looking to deepen their existing work, and those looking to launch brand new initiatives. These calls can also inspire unique collaborations, between multiple organizations, that propose working together to innovatively tackle a challenge in a way that would be impossible through other funding channels. Selection criteria varies from competition to competition, and it is inevitable that some worthy, vetted organizations will miss out on funding because other proposals better fit a competition's set of criteria, not necessarily because those organizations are better at delivering on their mission.

² Public, open funding calls can be great ways to draw attention to critical social issues and surface effective solutions. However, for the nonprofits applying to these competitions, participation can be a risk. Nonprofits are asked to constantly repackage their story, vision, goals, impact metrics, and project plans to fit the brief. These applications can be time-

The Details

As a test case, we started with a list of more than 80 applicants across the world who responded to an open call for **locally rooted organizations that are advancing gender equality**. These organizations were partially funded finalists³, not unfunded but certainly underfunded, and the intent was to bring this list to advisors at a large national Donor Advised Fund (DAF) who could place opportunities in front of HNW clients who were seeking philanthropic strategy advice.



We experimented with different methods of sharing these strategic opportunities with advisors, collecting feedback to better understand their decision-making processes as they determined which opportunities to share with their clients.

With this approach, we saw multiple opportunities to leverage behavioral insights to mitigate the psychological barriers described above, and to strengthen the appeal of the organizations overall:

- Emphasize that the competition's funder has already vetted the organizations. This endorsement should help reassure donors that these are trusted opportunities.

consuming, often with a slim chance of getting any return on that investment of effort and resources. This is particularly challenging for smaller organizations that lack the grant writing and fundraising resources available to larger organizations.

³ The competition funder requested we shift our focus to spotlighting the grantees that they had partially funded, since they had already carefully vetted and chosen those to support, and those organizations were still underfunded. This highlights the challenge of fairness and equity in this work--when not every organization can get all the funding they need, even if they do "win," does it make sense to further diversify the pool?

- Use a curated list (5-15) rather than show all organizations. This makes it easier for advisors and donors to navigate choosing between many organizations.
- Reframe the opportunities. More clear and accessible language could help make opportunities feel more compelling, including highlighting impact that is specific and salient, telling stories with emotional connection, and using clear and accessible language. The finalist status of these applicants should help donors feel better about trusting that their investments will be used effectively.
- Use advisors to bring these new giving opportunities to donors who are already interested in being more strategic. This helps overcome the challenges of a crowded attention space that may otherwise result in these organizations being overlooked. Advisors can also help donors more quickly understand complex causes like (international) gender equality.

Learnings from the Pilot & Advisor Interviews

The first learning was immediate: trying to curate and reframe applicants into a short list was far more difficult than anticipated. It felt inequitable to leave anyone out; it was risky to reframe opportunities without the organization's consent; it was impossible to get standard data to share about these organizations. With international efforts, some organizations had US 501(c)3 designations and some did not, further complicating giving from DAFs and by US-based donors.

As a result, we began instead with a user-friendly database of all organizations and offered this resource directly to advisors. We knew that building a separate tool was a risk, because, like donors, many advisors likely rely on their networks rather than formal resources to discover giving opportunities. However, by conducting user research with a targeted list of institutional advisors (e.g. those employed by a DAF provider) who had expressed interest in the tool, we hoped to overcome initial friction enough to gather useful initial insights about the appeal of unfunded opportunities.

Nonetheless, while the initial response was positive, few advisors leveraged the database to research giving opportunities in gender equality or to export lists for clients. Theoretically, advisors could also have shared the database directly with donors, but this also did not appear to happen.

We were able to conduct additional research later, at the Advisors in Philanthropy conference, with a different short, curated list of real organizations. We presented this to a small pool of advisors and gathered feedback on the list and insight into the advisors' decision-making processes.

Together, these efforts generated useful insights and recommendations on:

- How **the packaging of “gender equality” opportunities** might impact interest (page 8)
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Packaging “Gender Equality” Giving Opportunities

Many organizations in our database described bold goals: “Transformative feminist economics”; “gender-sensitive policy”; “high-quality patient-centered public maternity care.” These opportunities are also about increasing access to economic security and improving public health. However, the bold gender-first framing of these opportunities, while compelling for certain funders’ application processes, may limit broader donor interest. One uncomfortable theme among our small pool of interviews: Some advisors just don’t think donors are interested in gender equality, and they seem unwilling to recommend it to donors that haven’t specifically asked about gender work.

We asked some advisors:

How does gender come up in your work?

“ I have to say, gender doesn’t come up.”

“ Women lead with gender preferences, but men usually don’t mention it unless they’re personally affected through women in their lives.”

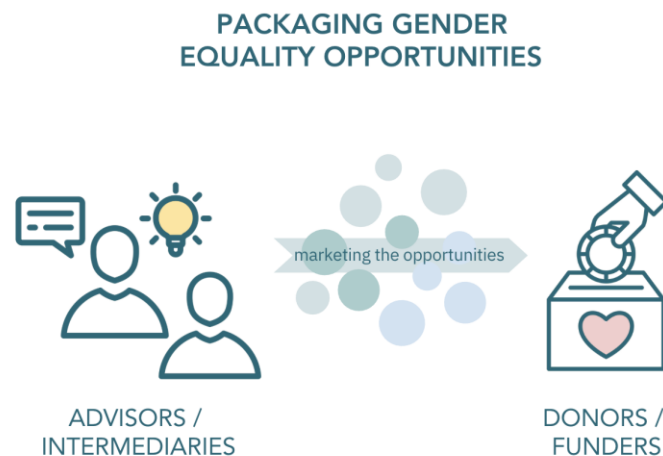
“ People bring up things like the pipeline into politics, childcare, girls in STEM, and reproductive rights.”

In our research at the Advisors in Philanthropy conference, advisors were given a list of six international organizations, all focused on health and women (*Appendix 1A*).⁴ After reviewing the list,

⁴ We chose women’s health as only 2% of medical research funding is focused on pregnancy, childbirth, and female reproductive health (Imperial College London) and women spend ~25% more of their (longer) lifetime in poor health than men (World Economic Forum).

advisors then selected the organization(s) they would recommend to a hypothetical client (*Appendix 1B*). These were all real, highly rated organizations that had been curated by Lever for Change for this study. There was one key variable changed in how the organizations were presented to different advisors—half saw descriptions of organizations that focused on “health,” “public health,” or “community health” initiatives, and the other half saw descriptions of those same organizations that instead focused on “women’s health,” “reproductive health,” or “women and girls’ health.”

In our interviews with advisors about the list of organizations that were described as focusing on “women’s health,” “reproductive health,” or “women and girls’ health,” the more specific the organization name, cause area, and/or description of an organization, especially in describing the specific women’s health aspect of the work, the more niche the organization was perceived to be, and the less likely advisors were to recommend those organizations to their hypothetical donor client.



A women’s health organization is still a health organization, but specialized terminology skewed advisors’ perceptions about these organizations, their impact, and their anticipated appeal to a generic client. Instead, the advisors we interviewed preferred organizations that seemed to address health challenges more broadly (the word “community” was often favored); Lwala Community Alliance was the favorite.

Some advisors provided further insights into how they made their selections:

What made you select this organization?

“ I liked the fact that Lwala was focused on the whole community rather than being specific to mothers.”

“ I don’t think there’s anything wrong with giving broadly when first starting out in a cause area—I’d recommend giving to all organizations, then tracking and assessing over time.”

“ I like that there is a community-led approach with partnerships—I think this would be more scalable.”

Organizations must balance language tradeoffs

Nonprofits working on gender equality often face a communication dilemma. Using specialized language can demonstrate credibility and expertise, but it may also limit broader support. Certain ways of describing gender-focused work, especially international or systems-change efforts, may trigger disengagement or skepticism, even when the impact potential is clear.

Niche language signals who this is for (or not). Language that emphasizes gender-focused work, like “gender-sensitive policy,” can be viewed as ideological or niche, discouraging engagement from donors (and advisors) who don’t see themselves (or their clients) as the target audience.

Spotlighting gender equality can backfire. Even well-intentioned funders who aim to spotlight gender equality can unintentionally narrow an organization’s appeal by requiring (and then marketing) gender-specific framing that may limit resonance with broader funder pools or cross-sector audiences.

Jargon can reduce trust. [Research shows](#) that complex or unfamiliar language can heighten perceived risk and reduce trust overall. This can compound already existing behavioral barriers, making donors less likely to invest. Language doesn’t just affect funding -- it may even shape [how issues are understood and who feels responsible](#) for addressing them.

Precision and credibility are essential, but reframing gender equality work to emphasize cross-cutting impact and universal relevance (e.g., “scaling community-led health” or “empowering communities by

offering lifesaving care”) may unlock new donors and expand the pool of support. More research—and pragmatic approaches—on the most compelling messaging could help funders and organizations alike achieve their goals.

How Advisors Source and Screen Opportunities

Advisors can be an important channel to help high-capacity donors discover new organizations. For example, the largest provider of DAFs, Fidelity Charitable, offers donors with accounts of \$3M or more access to “philanthropic strategists” for guidance on charitable giving.

How important are advisors as a key channel to donors?

- 81% of HNW households report working with an advisor (BNY Mellon 2022 Annual Charitable Gift Report)
- 4-21% of HNW households report that their wealth advisor guided their giving, and a smaller number (1.6-12%) report working with a philanthropic advisor (BNY Mellon 2022 Annual Charitable Gift Report)
- \$60B of giving in 2024 was influenced by advisors to ultra-wealthy donors—that’s 9% of philanthropy (Chronicle of Philanthropy, research by P150)



In our interviews and user testing, we saw how behavioral influences and patterns among advisors—not just donors—can shape which opportunities and resources get shared and which are ignored.

What do you do when you're asked about an unfamiliar topic?

“ I search dearly beloved Google.”

“ I connect with other folks who are experts within an issue area and those with field experience.”

“ I have my own database.”

“ I use Candid and Foundation Source, and sometimes foundations publish their own research.”

Would you share a resource like this with fellow advisors?

“ If there was a specific inquiry I'd share it, but I wouldn't automatically send it around.”

“ I think this is a great list...but it's limited. What other deserving organizations are we missing?”

“ There are enough people doing the work, taking the time to vet organizations and put it all together, but then they make it proprietary.”

We uncovered a few themes through our conversations with advisors on their processes and research tools:



Advisors often take a thoughtful, values-based approach to identifying philanthropic opportunities, but this can unintentionally reinforce donors' existing behavioral biases. Skilled advisors excel at translating a donor's interests into inspiring recommendations—but in doing so, they may avoid suggesting causes the donor hasn't explicitly mentioned, like

gender equality. As a result, high impact but underfunded areas like this remain invisible. Behavioral factors like identity can further limit the range of recommendations. For instance, an advisor may assume that a male donor interested in health would be less interested in organizations focused on *women and girls'* health. Advisors' own identities and assumptions may also shape which opportunities they present.

Advisors also conduct research in a relational way. The value that advisors bring includes their networks, from which they can source unique recommendations for donors seeking new opportunities. This means that advisors, like their clients, often rely on personal connections rather than comprehensive tools. This may limit the discovery of new and/or smaller organizations, just as it does at the donor level.

There is wide variety in the types of resources advisors use. Some have sophisticated internal databases; more commonly, they use general search and peer conversations rather than comprehensive, vetted, formalized tools. Several philanthropic advisors we interviewed were unfamiliar with the Lever for Change finalist lists (aka the [Bold Solutions Network](#)).

Advisors likely derive value from putting the pieces together themselves. They research and build opportunities from different resources into a custom list for their client. Too much polish in a database like the one we tested may be wasted, as they would rather build it themselves (this is the "[Ikea effect](#)" at play). Too much curation generated skepticism that the list was comprehensive.

Finally, just like everyone else, **advisors have limited time and attention.** That means they are likely to use the same, familiar resources and research strategies, rather than explore new tools regularly. Ideally, new resources should be integrated into existing workflow.

Helping advisors broaden their recommendations

For advisors who are interested in broadening the causes and organizations they present to clients, behavioral science suggests several practical strategies that may help:

Diversify discovery methods. Use a wider variety of tools and processes to surface organizations beyond the usual suspects. Consider introducing lenses, like gender equality, that may amplify the impact of more "traditional" approaches to addressing issues.

Design choice sets to reduce uncertainty avoidance. To make unfamiliar organizations or complex issue areas--like gender equality--more appealing:

- Present high-uncertainty opportunities on their own, rather than alongside more established, lower-risk options.
- Avoid presenting precise impact metrics for some programs immediately before discussing those with less quantifiable outcome, which can unintentionally invite unfavorable comparison.
- Use accessible language and avoid excessive jargon, which can increase perceived risk and complexity.

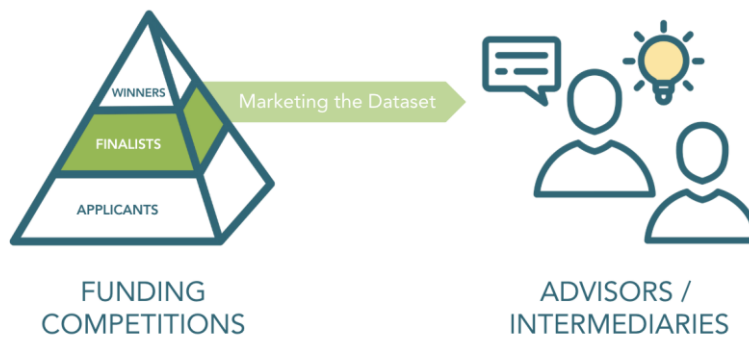
Explicitly surface client boundaries. Ask clients directly if there are any cause areas they're not open to funding. This gives advisors more freedom to suggest high-potential areas that haven't yet come up in conversation, but may still resonate.

Overall, advisors are influential gatekeepers in the philanthropic landscape. However, their [experience](#), roles, resources, and methods vary widely. Many carry their own personal biases and assumptions about what donors will or won't support. Further research and segmentation could help build more effective strategies, training, and infrastructure for these critical--but often fragmented--intermediaries.

Reusing Data from Grant Applications in New Ways

Grant application data from funding competitions is rich, underleveraged, and sometimes time-sensitive. While a well-designed database alone is unlikely to result in significant movement of dollars, the data is a foundation for generating activities -- like curated lists, philanthropic recommendations by advisors, marketing events, and donor and funder engagement around specific opportunities -- that do contribute to investment.

REUSING DATA FROM FUNDING COMPETITIONS



Our experience testing strategies that reuse competition applications also led us to consider other ways to leverage the data more broadly, and help both organizations improve visibility and funders make smarter, more strategic decisions.

Beyond our test case, below we offer several **strategies that may help competitions and funding platforms** amplify their impact by helping to drive more philanthropic support to underfunded applicants and issue areas. These recommendations and ideas are informed by best practices and our research, as well as our learnings about emerging AI capabilities. Behavioral insights can help guide these efforts by focusing on how decision-makers process information and take action.

Help target HNW donors discover aligned organizations

- Enable “matchmaking” between organizations and funders through events and introductions, using behavioral nudges like [social proof](#) and urgency
- Curate lists of highly rated organizations that didn’t receive funding and attract attention by sharing and marketing these lists with catchy names, in an easily searchable and discoverable format
- Personalize curated lists for specific high-capacity donors (or other competitions)
- Build relationships with trusted intermediaries, including advisors, Donor Advised Fund providers, community foundations, and donor collectives

Equip organizations to better reach donors and funders more broadly

- Ensure organizations have strong, up-to-date profiles on major databases and platforms like Candid, Charity Navigator, and Global Giving to increase their perceived legitimacy and streamline vetting by potential donors and funders
- Provide capacity building support on things like improving websites to facilitate validation and enable streamlined donation experiences
- Provide resources to support organization-driven fundraising (e.g., develop fundraising campaigns that include expert judges' quotes; capacity building for fundraising skills) and visibility (e.g., thought leadership and media support)

Help funders make smarter decisions about the field

- Provide data-driven recommendations to improve competitive funding processes across the sector, including by incorporating behavioral best practices such as feedback, norms, and simplified processes
- Identify and track the effectiveness of common approaches used by organizations that are tackling key challenges; translate this information into metrics that can help individuals donors better distinguish between organizations
- Identify funding gaps (by types of organizations, demographics, issue areas), and share findings and track progress using behavioral strategies like loss framing, urgency, and feedback to prompt action in the philanthropic sector

Drive more support to “underfunded” issue areas, like gender equality

- Reframe organizations' work in multiple ways that appeal to different funding perspectives; highlight the “spillover” strategic impact that giving specifically to women and girls can have on the broader social sector.
- Tag applicants flexibly, allowing them to be recognized across multiple relevant domains
- Identify common approaches to solving various issues and map applicants and organizations to those approaches, in a way that translates specialized actions into broader, more commonly funded issue areas

Conclusion



The strategy we tested ultimately uncovered many challenges in the process of translating underfunded finalists into giving opportunities for HNW donors. In addition to challenges with how quality data is sourced and screened, giving opportunities that specifically focus on gender equality likely trigger other psychological barriers among advisors and donors.

Driving more philanthropic support to gender equality, then, will require many efforts along this spectrum to unlock more dollars. Advisors and intermediaries are not a silver bullet to this challenge, as they also bring their own biases and barriers to the space. Perceptions of gender equality as a politicized issue likely complicate messaging more broadly.

However, the high return on investment in women and girls should be universally compelling. We are optimistic that smarter use of data and increased transparency among funders, coupled with tactical applications of behavioral insights on giving, can help close this critical gap in the future.

Appendix

1A. Advisors in Philanthropy Research: Most popular organization

Organization	Cause Area	Work Location(s)	Annual Operating Budget	Competition Name	Competition Status
Babies and Mothers Alive Foundation	Maternal & Infant Health	Uganda	\$1.1 to 5 Million	Maternal and Infant Health Award	Finalist
Center for Global Women's Health Technology	Health	Kenya, Peru	\$1.1 to 5 Million	100&Change	Finalist
Jacaranda Health	Maternal Health	Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya	\$5.1 to 10 Million	Maternal and Infant Health Award	Finalist
Lwala Community Alliance	Health	Kenya	\$5.1 to 10 Million	Maternal and Infant Health Award	Finalist
Maya Health Alliance Wuqu' Kawoq	Indigenous Women's Health	Guatemala	\$1.1 to 5 Million	Maternal and Infant Health Award	Finalist
Sinergias	Health	Colombia	Less than \$1 Million	Maternal and Infant Health Award	Finalist

1B. Advisors in Philanthropy Research: Hypothetical client scenario

" Let's consider a hypothetical client named Paul...

Paul is a new client, whom you are still getting to know, and he has requested a list of high-quality organizations focused on health that are located outside of the US. The client, Paul, is male, 66 years old, white, and a seasoned philanthropist who has given consistently but is relatively new to the health cause area.

Paul is not concerned with the name recognition of organizations and is open to all global regions—he doesn't want to pare down the list too quickly as he educates himself and formulates his giving strategy.