

Canadian Politics and Public Policy

Policy



Innovation



MATCH International Women's Fund provides funding to grassroots women's organizations such as Her Turn, in Nepal, which equips girls and young women with leadership skills, education and knowledge to reject early forced marriage. *MATCH International Women's Fund photo*

Mother of Innovation: How Women Everywhere are Finding Solutions

Too often, when we think of innovation, we visualize an object—a jet engine, an iPhone, a robot—instead of a person. Innovation begins in the human brain, and more and more, the brains sparking the ingenuity that produces change belong to women. In many parts of the world, that change can represent the difference between sustenance and starvation, earning and begging, or life and death. The MATCH International Fund is helping women everywhere innovate to beat the odds.

Jess Tomlin

As the story goes, Apple co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs wore the same thing every single day: a dark turtleneck and jeans. By eliminating the day-to-day decision of which shirt to choose, he freed his mind for bigger, brighter things. Jobs' clothes were unremarkable. His innovations, legendary.

Halfway around the globe, a woman in Iraq dons the dark outer clothing required to move about the streets of Baghdad. She walks purposefully, hidden in plain sight. Hiding is,

in fact, her biggest innovation—specifically, hiding others within a network of safe houses for women escaping violence. Her daily decisions could cost her her life. Blending in is her vehicle for disruption.

As the CEO of the MATCH International Women’s Fund, Canada’s global women’s fund, I am brought to my knees by the stories of innovation and disruption led by women around the world. Like the example of the underground safe houses in Iraq, women and girls in the most marginalized communities are identifying bold solutions to the barriers they face.

But these ideas rarely make headlines. This is why I have made it my life’s work to change the narratives around innovation and, as a funder, to seek even better ways to support those first sparks of genius.

Let’s start with the very image of *who* innovates. The frenzied inventor in his cluttered workshop. The visionary with a palm-sized computer. The lone male innovator. We are missing some of the most revolutionary ideas of our day if we stop there. Women’s ingenuity is all around us. Yet innovations led by the very women who are pushed to the wall are so big and so bright that we often fail to recognize them for what they are: the solutions that will save us all. We don’t have to look far into grassroots women’s movements to find examples:

In rural Democratic Republic of the Congo, five women nearly lost their land due to patrilineal land rules. These women came together—not only to save five plots of land (which they did) but also to address the realities of climate change in a country that loses a land mass equal to Banff National Park every two years. Domestic workers in Mali, like many domestic workers around the globe, are underpaid, overworked, and at risk within a largely-unregulated industry. Recently, Mali’s domestic workers organized to successfully raise the minimum wage for all and mandate no more than a six-day work week. Girls in the mountains of Nepal un-

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derstand the dangers of child marriage. They have formed “No Marriage Allowed” clubs to keep each other safe and to educate entire communities about the harmful effects of marrying off little girls.

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W ithin the MATCH Fund, we call work like this “building the bridge as we walk across it” or “charting a course without a map.” We are inspired by the courage it takes to innovate—especially when failure can be a matter of life or death. The question then becomes, how can we, as a funder, rise to the occasion by also innovating from within? How can push ourselves to be bigger and brighter to support those who need us most?

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the philanthropy community.

1. **More is More:** Often, the most vital community work is done on a shoestring, with the average grassroots women’s organization operating on less than \$20,000 a year. Imagine what could be achieved if those at the grassroots had the resources they truly needed. Our role as a funder is to unlock new resources with the same fire in our bellies as the women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo who fight climate change. The innovation is to forge new partnerships, inspire collective action, and change hearts and minds. This is what will tap new funding and “grow the pie.” In my experience, this requires preaching beyond the choir.
2. **Explore the Margins:** The grittiest and most urgent work cannot be found in the mainstream. As funders, we must scout emergent groups with intention. A few years ago, I met a young woman from India who lives with a vision impairment. She wanted to create an app to connect women with disabilities to caregivers. She didn’t yet have an official nonprofit organization, but she was a woman on a mission. Because she had the courage to try a new idea, we had the courage to be an early adopter. Her idea has since blossomed into an official organization that serves people with disabilities throughout Mumbai.
3. **Shift Power:** Innovation within the funder community can sometimes be sparked by asking

this simple question: who's missing? The MATCH Fund found that decisions about who and where to fund were often made without consulting community experts. As Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to win a seat in the United States Congress, has famously said, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair." The MATCH Fund has partnered with Nobel Women's Initiative to bring young and emerging activists, Nobel peace laureates, and regional women's funds to the decision-making table with government bodies and global philanthropists.

4. Direct funding is catalytic:

The shared economy (i.e. Uber, Airbnb) has some powerful lessons for the philanthropy sector, namely, the power and economic value of directly resourcing the grassroots. In international development work, the "middle" often

manifests as country offices of large international non-governmental organizations (iNGOs). While an important part of the humanitarian and development response, country offices do create another layer of bureaucracy, which means that donations take longer to get to the people for whom they are intended. The MATCH Fund's innovation—like other women's funds around the world—has been to give directly to the people and movements making change on the ground.

5. **Come Early. Stay Late:** Being an early adopter is, indeed, important. So is being a partner over the long haul. Coming on as one of their first funders, the MATCH Fund supported a group of sex workers in Nicaragua in 2015. More than a seed investment, this grant allowed the group to more than double in size in a three-year period,

reaching some of the most marginalized and underserved women in the country. When we innovate the way that grantmaker/grantee relationships work—seeing them instead as partnerships—funders can truly support local-led innovations from tiny sparks to roaring flames of change.

Our everyday decisions do deeply impact our capacity to innovate—and to support the brave women and girls who are creatively and courageously driving transformation within their communities. Paradoxically, these innovations—a term surrounded by words like "hack" and "disrupt"—are ultimately what will make the world a more consistent and equal place for women. That is, after all, the biggest and brightest goal. **P**

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