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In the work of creating a gender-equitable society, men play an essential role – this is labour that women should not and cannot shoulder alone. But in virtually every society, the traditional framing of empowerment expects women to be the main participants and asks them to take on the unequal systems alone.

How do you fund change like this?

We decided to try with a learning approach.

Some years ago, Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies started a portfolio focussed on working with Young Men and Boys (YMBs).

While there are several non-profits and donors that are passionate about including men in their work for gender equality, such an approach can be quite difficult. Men may not prioritise these engagements, as they don't immediately see how it can benefit them. Boys and men are harder to recruit into programmes or to retain. And mixed gender environments can become challenging when the gender and sexual dynamics of the outside world seep into programme-centric gatherings and events.

Against this backdrop, Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies became interested in how boys and men can be engaged, in a *sustainable* manner, and our going-in approach was to first understand the lives of boys and men.

Learning grants and research

To engage with Young Men and Boys better, we initiated multiple 'learning grants' – smaller grants made to first time grantees with the aim of giving us some exposure to the space. Given the space was new to us, we had no evidence or experience upon which to mount a YMB portfolio strategy. So, we decided to partner with a researcher who would go on the journey with us, and work with our grantees to continuously make visible the dynamic results of their programmes. Moreover, the opportunity to work with a researcher to refine programmatic theories and impact, was positioned as an option rather than a must-do. Partners were given the opportunity to opt out not only at the start of the project, but also once the research design had been completed and before implementation. And partners were also assured that if they were to opt out, this would have no bearing on our funding decisions.

We hoped to learn from the research as co-travellers. The distinction between research and evaluation was made to emphasise that it was not being conducted to enforce partner accountability to us.

Srinivasan, the researcher we worked with, writes: 'The distinction that was being drawn could also be described as that between *evaluations for accountability* and evaluations for *learning*. The two paradigms of evaluations for accountability and evaluations for learning differ in both the retrospective and prospective questions that they ask.

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'At their core, the retrospective question that evaluations for accountability ask are, "Did the programme deliver the results that it promised to?" Following from this, the prospective question that evaluations for accountability ask is, "If we renew funding, will the programme continue to deliver on these results?" In contrast, evaluations for learning ask retrospectively, "What did we learn from this programme?" Prospectively, evaluations for learning ask, "If we renew funding, what more can we learn and how can we improve upon the programme?"'

The research process involved an examination of a partner's theory of change, but in a way that made manifest the unconscious assumptions built into programmatic approaches. For example, a programme that focussed on making boys more aware of menstrual hygiene *assumed* that empathy would follow awareness. The approach did not account for the fact that that very information could be weaponised instead – through teasing of girls, something which happened in the experience of one of our partners. After that, the partner revised their approach and left us with a better understanding of how awareness-building programmes need to account for unintended consequences.

In another instance, one of our partners implementing a Personal Safety Education programme for middle school and high school students discovered that some of the same concepts, when introduced to middle school students, had a negative impact versus high school students, who did fine with the content. The insight from this work was that, even within teenagers, early teens differ from late teens in meaningful ways.

One of the more complex unintended consequences of gender-focussed programs is the backlash participants face from their families and communities. In the case of boys and men, partners sometimes report pushback from communities in the form of resistance, i.e. not allowing boys and men to interfere with established social norms, or ridicule, i.e. teasing or taunts from friends, including the women in their lives. Learning these ground-truths is helpful as they reveal the layers that programs need to work through in order to create sustainable change.

Implications beyond work with YMB

The research for our YMB portfolio is ongoing, but we also see value in taking this evaluation approach for our other portfolios. We don't believe that we can ever know how to design or run a programme in a more relevant and responsive manner than the organisations we partner with. So, we allow ourselves to be led by curiosity and trust.

As we round off the first quarter of the new year, life is yet to return to 'normal'. Many field-based organisations continue to face operational challenges – their programmatic fates linked to the rise and fall of epidemiological curves – and the full extent of the loss suffered by individuals and communities is yet to be known. When the pandemic arrived in full force, it paralysed many systems and institutions we took for granted. At that time, it was civil society organisations and non-profits that proved to be incredibly agile – serving both as emergency responders as well as channels for feedback for us.
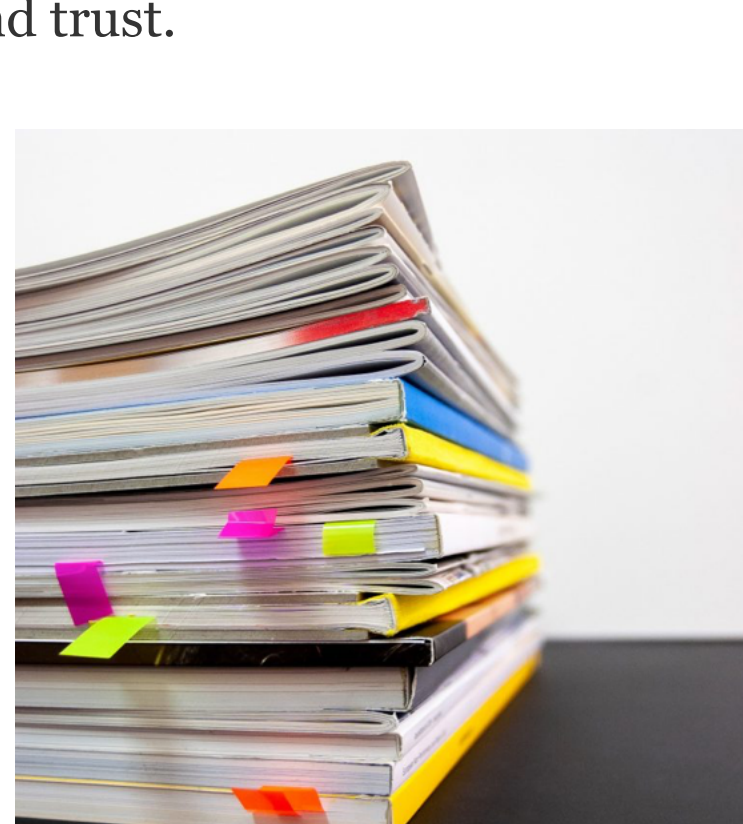
We revised our report template and instead of asking about the programmes, we asked how our partners were doing and what they had learned.

Staying with a trust-based philanthropic approach, we restructured grants to allow partners to show up for the communities they serve. We also revised our report template and instead of asking about the programmes, we decided to ask founders and CEOs how they were doing, and what they had learned. What came back, was pages of reflections from 32 portfolio organisations: honest, insightful accounts of the trials and triumphs these individuals had experienced in what was undoubtedly one of the most challenging years many of us had lived through. We read each report – it took a while! – and pushed ourselves to do portfolio level syntheses so that we could do justice to all that was being shared with us. In many cases, we responded to our partners highlighting what really stood out for us, to visualise their role in helping us see the space better.

The past year has reinforced our faith in staying curious, but through research methodologies like evaluations for learning or changing up reporting formats, we are finding ways to take this intent into our operations.

Natasha Joshi is an Associate Director at Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies.

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