



## SUMMARY REPORT AND IWDA MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

# THE VALUE OF IWDA AS A FEMINIST AND DECOLONIAL PARTNER: PROGRESS ON THE PATH TO A GENDER-EQUAL FUTURE

**A Review of IWDA's Feminist and Decolonial Approach to Partnership**

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IWDA and the women's rights organisations they partner with.

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We acknowledge the Wurundjeri people and the Kurna people as the Traditional Custodians of the unceded lands on which we live and work. We pay our deepest respects to their Elders past and present. We honour the strength, generosity, and knowledges of First Nations peoples, and commit to ongoing learning and action in support of justice and self-determination.

This review was made possible by the generous contributions of time, insights and reflections from women's rights organisations across Asia and the Pacific who partner with IWDA, as well as from IWDA itself. We also pay our respect to the foundational work of researchers we build upon.

Please see the authors full acknowledgement in the full research document on the IWDA website.

**Impact  
Advisory  
Group.**

# Reflections from IWDA CEO



At IWDA, we believe that how we do our work matters as much as what we do. Feminist transformation is not only about outcomes; it is about relationships, power, accountability and the courage to change ourselves. This research represents a moment of reflection in that ongoing journey – a chance to pause, listen and learn.

Firstly, I want to thank Min Wah, Muktasree and Anastasia, and all those who have generously contributed their time and insight to this important and powerful work. The honesty and depth captured here speak to the trust that underpins our partnerships.

IWDA has been – and continues to be – on a journey to decolonise our development practice. We know that decolonisation is not an end state; it is an ongoing commitment that requires humility, intentionality and persistence.

In 2020, we articulated for the first time our commitment to sit decoloniality alongside feminism as an organising principle for our work. In 2021, we commissioned research led by Pacific feminist and storyteller Ófa-Ki-Levuka Guttenbeil-Likiliki to strengthen our partnership practices as a Minority-world organisation working alongside Majority-world feminists. In 2024, we released our Decolonial Framework and Strategy, clarifying what we mean by decoloniality and outlining the steps ahead. These commitments are now embedded throughout our 10-Year Strategic Framework (2025–2035).

As we strive to demonstrate that a different way of being and doing development is possible, it is critical that we pause and listen. We must ask our partners and trusted allies whether we are on the right path and where we need to course correct. This research has given us that pause.

It tells us that we have made meaningful progress, while also reminding us that this work requires continued investment. Our partners acknowledge the evolution of our partnership model over the past decade and say we stand apart in both our approach (the how) and our activities (the what). They see us moving beyond a commitment to “locally led” and embracing a genuinely feminist and decolonial approach. Importantly, the research highlights the intrinsic value of our approach – how it feels to be in partnership with IWDA and what it enables.

Building this intrinsic value is not accidental. It creates the enabling environment through which development can genuinely be feminist, anti-racist, decolonial and locally led. We have been intentional in investing in our people and organisational culture to deliver this. Good development happens because of the strengths of the people involved and the relationships they build. It has taken time, patience and the vulnerability to try, learn and evolve.

As global structures shift in ways that feel increasingly uncertain, it is more critical than ever that we remain steadfast in our feminist and decolonial commitments in the pursuit of gender equality. This summary report shares the highlights of the research and outlines our ongoing commitments to deepen and evolve our approach. In sharing it, we hope to spark new conversations across the sector – ripples that grow into transformative change.

In solidarity,  
**Nayomi Kannangara**

# 1. Executive Summary

## The Value of IWDA’s Feminist and Decolonial Approach to Partnerships

The International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA) has taken bold and evolving steps to redefine how international partnerships can centre feminist and decolonial principles. A key milestone in this journey was the launch of its Decolonial Framework and Strategy in 2023, articulating IWDA’s commitment to challenging colonial power dynamics in development practice.<sup>1</sup> This review, grounded in the insights and experiences of women’s rights organisations that partner with IWDA and complemented by critical analysis, affirms that IWDA’s approach creates deep value—relationally, operationally, and systemically—while also navigating the complex tensions of operating within traditional, donor-driven development systems.

**“We really feel that IWDA stands with us—not above us.”**

Grantee partner

## Research purpose and methodology

The review was structured around three guiding questions:

1. What is IWDA’s partnership approach in theory and practice? How does it compare to other Minority World (Global North) actors?
2. What value does IWDA create for women’s rights organisations and feminist movements? Why and how?
3. How can IWDA strengthen this value over the next 3–5 years?

Drawing on interviews, a meta-review of internal and external documents, and a rapid literature review on the decolonisation of development, this review was guided by feminist and decolonial research principles. A total of nine partner organisations (six grantees and three collaborators) were interviewed, along with twelve current and former IWDA staff. The research was grounded in the belief that a feminist, decolonised approach to partnership holds inherent value—because it is a rights-based approach to development, based on the principle of self-determination. Attempting to articulate the ‘value’ of this approach inevitably raises tensions: whose definitions of value are being used, and who decides what counts. Even at the global level, there remains an evidence gap around the ‘value’ of locally led development.<sup>2</sup> At its core, this research centres partner perspectives in the findings and recommendations, with IWDA insights and critical analysis included where complementary and supportive.

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<sup>1</sup> International Women’s Development Agency (2023), *Decolonial Framework and Strategy*, Melbourne: IWDA.

<sup>2</sup> Lucas, B. (2024). *Approaches to Institutionalising Locally Led Development* (K4DD Rapid Evidence Review No.106). Institute of Development Studies.

## Key Findings

### A Fundamental Tension

IWDA is at the forefront of international non-governmental organisation (INGO) efforts to decolonise development, even as it continues to operate within systems that remain deeply colonial. This creates ongoing tensions that IWDA must carefully navigate in its partnerships with women's rights organisations and feminist movements. Nowhere is this more evident than in the issues raised by the due diligence and compliance requirements of institutional donors like the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Any consideration of the value IWDA brings to women's rights organisations and feminist movements—both now and in the future—must be grounded in an understanding of this broader and often contradictory context.

### Spectrum of Partners, Spectrum of Experiences

Women's rights organisations that partner with IWDA span a wide range of contexts, sizes, priorities, and stages of organisational development—from new grassroots women's rights organisations to well-established regional feminist networks. Naturally, their experiences and expectations of partnership with IWDA vary. Even within similar partnership types—such as one-to-one, project-based grantee partnerships focused on service delivery—there are some varying views on the effectiveness of IWDA's support.

### More than an INGO – A Sister Organisation

According to partners, IWDA stands apart from other NGOs in both its approach (“How”) and its activities (“What”)—while there is also room for growth. Over the past decade, partners have observed a clear evolution in IWDA's partnership model—from a more traditional, ‘Minority World’ top-down approach to one that is distinctly feminist, locally led, and increasingly decolonial. IWDA's approach is experienced by partners as distinctive in several key areas. These include:

- Flexibility
- Whole-of-organisation approach - not just funding
- Funding and resource mobilisation
- Feminist principles
- Decolonial values and practices
- Locally led
- Power sensitivity and power sharing
- Equality, respect, reciprocity
- Mutual learning.

**“IWDA remains one of the great partners among feminist organisations. They are learning and doing at the same time... [Other INGOs] say they apply a feminist lens but IWDA... really do it.”**

**Grantee partner**

### ‘Locally Led’ and Beyond

IWDA goes beyond a ‘locally led’ model, embracing a feminist and decolonial approach to partnership. Nevertheless, it is notable that IWDA's practice clearly aligns with both the Advanced level of DFAT's Locally Led Development Continuum and the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) definition of locally-led action.<sup>3</sup> This alignment is consistently reflected in partner experiences and feedback, reflecting IWDA's commitment to shared power and mutual learning.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Council for International Development (ACFID). (n.d.). *Good Practice Toolkit*. Retrieved June 26, 2025, from ACFID website: <https://acfid.asn.au/good-practice-toolkit/>

## The “So What” of IWDA’s Feminist, Decolonised Approach to Partnership

IWDA brings both intrinsic value (inwardly felt) and extrinsic value (externally visible) to partners. These benefits reinforce each other to strengthen partner organisations, increase resilience, support growth, and contribute to broader movement-building.

<b>INTRINSIC</b> The How	 Inter-related Positively or negatively reinforce	<b>EXTRINSIC</b> The What
Confidence Transparency Trust Safe space Respect Power sensitivity and sharing Agency Can negotiate Equals Reciprocity Relationality Mutual learning Connection Networking	<p><i>“I feel they [IWDA] really care about us (<b>intrinsic</b>). They listen and they understand and if they don’t understand what we are saying, they keep asking questions so that they really do understand (<b>intrinsic</b>) and they listen some more and ask us how do we want to approach the problem (<b>intrinsic</b>). When we tell how we want to do it, they approve it (<b>extrinsic</b>) and support us with extra funds (<b>extrinsic</b>) if we need it and can justify it. This is not normal – well, not with other donors.”<sup>14</sup></i></p>	Responsive <b>programming</b> <b>Operations</b> capacity Stronger <b>governance</b> <b>Sustainability</b> <b>Knowledge</b> products and sharing - with ethos of <b>open source</b> sharing for the benefit of the feminist movement <b>Influence</b> and advocacy Linkages across local, national, regional, and global levels Coalition and <b>movement strengthening</b>

### Room for Growth and Missed Opportunities

While the above reflects the overall experience of many partners, it is important to acknowledge that this has not been universal. There are instances where IWDA’s partnership approach has not fully delivered the intrinsic or extrinsic value expected by partners. This includes around continuity (due to staff turnover), support for independent sustainability, IWDA occasionally overstepping in decision-making, and the need to ‘nurture the Vā’ - valuing time, reciprocity, and relational depth in partnerships.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> IWDA Stakeholder Perception Review 2023-24

<sup>5</sup> See Guttenbeil-Likiliki, ‘Ofa-Ki-Levuka (2020), Creating Equitable South-North Partnerships: Nurturing the Vā and Voyaging the Audacious Ocean Together, Melbourne: IWDA.

## IWDA's Value from a Systems Lens: Powerful Critic, Alternative Visionary, Bridging Innovator

Global aid and development are in a moment of transition—a time marked by the disruption and gradual decline of a colonial, Minority World-led system, even as new, Majority World-led alternatives begin to emerge. In this in-between space, IWDA's role is significant (see Figure 1 below). IWDA's *Decolonial Framework and Strategy*, positions IWDA as both a Powerful Critic and Alternative Visionary and provides enabling guidance for development practice and relationships—challenging dominant aid structures while articulating feminist and decolonial alternatives. Simultaneously, IWDA acts as a Bridging Innovator—working within existing systems to model transformative change, as reflected in its 2025 Strategy commitment to building “*feminist and decolonial pathways to a gender equal future for all.*” This dual role—inside and critiquing the system—offers influence, but also brings tensions. Drawing on its Decolonial Framework, IWDA is intentionally *Sitting With* these tensions: embracing uncertainty, deep listening, and collective discernment. From a systems lens, this capacity to hold complexity is itself part of the value IWDA brings.

### Systems Lens: IWDA's value to women's rights organisations and feminist movements



Source: Mark Cabaj, CFI Transforming Systems Forum 2023; adapted by authors to the IWDA context

Yet IWDA remains tethered to the existing system: 80 percent of its funding comes from DFAT. This reliance on traditional donor funding—with its heavy Western donor-driven compliance requirements and rigidity of timeframes—limits IWDA's ability to fully realise its feminist and decolonial commitments. This tension—between decolonial aspirations and operating within colonial structures—surfaced consistently in partner reflections and underpins many of the structural and relational challenges they described, even as they acknowledged IWDA's efforts to work differently within these constraints.

A question for IWDA is, in bringing value for partners: *how much should one adapt to, versus resist, the existing donor-driven system?*

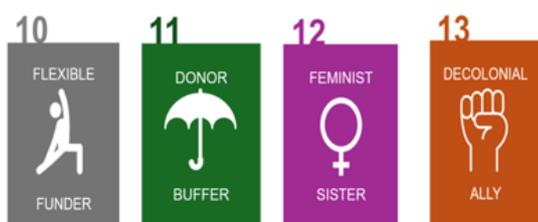
There is no one-size-fits-all approach, as women's rights organisations hold diverse priorities and expectations. Guided by a vision of vibrant and diverse feminist movements, and committed to supporting a broad spectrum of women's rights organisations, coalitions, and movements, IWDA must respond in ways that are context-specific and relational. This means continually holding its broader vision in focus while adapting its role and support to align with the unique needs and capacities of each partner.

One way to help make sense of the varied and sometimes contradictory value that intermediaries like IWDA—committed to decolonising development while still operating within and dependent on colonial systems—bring is to draw on Peace Direct’s *Nine Roles for Intermediaries*,<sup>6</sup> released in 2023 following its 2021 call to decolonise aid. Based on feedback from partners, we have identified four additional roles that reflect how IWDA is perceived. We found that IWDA currently plays *all* the intermediary roles below (Figure 2) at different times<sup>7</sup> (with the exception of Watchdog) (see Annex 5 for an explanation of each of the roles).

### Peace Direct’s Nine Roles for Intermediaries



### Four Additional Roles Based on Partners’ Feedback on IWDA’s Value



## Transitions and Tensions: Opportunities and Risks

IWDA itself is also at a turning point. As it continues its journey toward being both *for* and *of* the feminist movement, it must grapple with questions of role, identity, and accountability—as a Minority World-based organisation that is not rooted in the lived realities of the movements it seeks to support. This demands ongoing reflection, deep engagement with feminist partners, and intentional staff recruitment and capacity-building to uphold its values and aspirations.

These are not new challenges; IWDA has long been in open dialogue with movement partners on these tensions. What remains essential is sustained investment in IWDA’s ability to navigate these complex and often contradictory spaces—so it can continue to deliver meaningful value to partners and feminist movements as it evolves.

<sup>6</sup> Peace Direct (2023). *The nine roles that intermediaries can play in international cooperation*. London: Peace Direct. Available here: [<https://www.peacedirect.org/the-nine-roles-that-intermediaries-can-play-in-international-cooperation/>]. Accessed 13 June 2025.

<sup>7</sup> This is Peace Direct’s Nine Roles for Intermediaries - with four roles we added to reflect the feedback from partners: Flexible Funder; Donor Buffer, Feminist Sister, Decolonial Ally.

**“IWDA do this type of review regularly. We appreciate it. It keeps an organisation honest when they can have these partnership reviews. It’s a very gutsy move that IWDA engages in - good on them. The question is, where to from here?”**

Grantee partner

**“It’s very tricky where IWDA is - I respect the ideals they are striving for, to decolonise, but also understand the reality we are in and think that as partners, we need to give them grace, as what they are doing is ambitious and takes time, and it will not be perfect. They deserve our grace, like they do for us.”**

Grantee partner

## Recommendations

To sustain IWDA’s value to partners and feminist movements as it continues to evolve, the following recommendations are offered. IWDA has or is already taking action in many of these areas. The report includes more detail based on partner feedback and further critical analysis.

Researcher and partner recommendations	IWDA response
<b>1. Address structural barriers to feminist and decolonial development</b> by creating the conditions for feminist, flexible funding.	<b>Agree</b> - We remain committed to advocating for more equitable, feminist and decolonial practices to development. We will continue to work with feminist partners and movements to strengthen advocacy and learning as well as engaging with DFAT and other funders to look at what a feminist and decolonial articulation of value looks like.
<b>2 Enable decolonial practice</b> by renegotiating donor terms and exploring alternative funding models.	<b>Agree</b> - We will continue to take learnings from evolving fund models to continue to negotiate with our funders for what a more flexible funding partnership could look like.
<b>3 Centre IWDA’s partnerships approach on linking the local, national, regional, and global.</b>	<b>Partially agree</b> - We commit to continuing to invest in partner participation in national and regional forums and facilitating peer learning and exchange. We commit to reviewing our partnerships to assess alignment with local to global movements as well as identifying opportunities for new partnerships. We will strengthen IWDA’s role and value add in each partnership and be transparent about our capabilities and limitations. We however acknowledge the tension of working in a colonial system and the constraints this creates for governance and representation.

<p><b>4 Decolonise compliance processes</b> and work with partners to build organisational sustainability.</p>	<p><b>Agree</b> - We commit to engaging with our partners on how we decolonise due diligence, compliance and reporting and develop simplified ways of working. We will aim to co-create robust exit strategies with our partners. Internally we will review our delegations process, finance support and accompaniment practice to better reflect feminist partnership practices. We will participate in communities of practice and continue to share our learnings with the sector.</p>
<p><b>5 Sustain and strengthen IWDA's partnerships team</b> through planning, resourcing, and role clarity.</p>	<p><b>Agree</b> - We remain committed to provide core funding where feasible and flexible, planned and tailored accompaniment. We will continue to evolve our staff roles to contract and grant managers</p>
<p><b>6 Invest in professional development and shared learning</b> for staff and partners to enable feminist, decolonial partnership - from networking through to skills in decolonial collaboration, collective leadership and feminist governance.</p>	<p><b>Agree</b> - We will create opportunities to build capacity in feminist and decolonial collaboration, continue efforts to reduce language barriers and decentre English from our work as well as prioritise face to face learning.</p>
<p><b>7 Deepen IWDA's role as "for and of the feminist movement"</b> through providing core funding, engaging in advocacy, and strengthening IWDA's political awareness, experience and capacity in feminist movements and partnerships.</p>	<p><b>Partially agree</b> - Where feasible we will continue to support partners whole of organisation strategies through flexible, core funding and prioritise time and relational depth as critical elements of our feminist partnerships, as well as continuing to recruit and retain staff with lived experience. We will continue to leverage IWDA's influence in Australia to advance feminist movement goals alongside further clarifying our identity and role as it continues to evolve. We will not evaluate recommendations from past reviews but use this research and our new strategy and monitoring approach to refine next steps.</p>
<p><b>8 Resource IWDA's Decolonial Framework as strategy and practice</b> through exploring opportunities to engage in-country, given the importance of First Nations women's rights in Australia, and investing in skills, knowledge, recruitment, learning, and advocacy.</p>	<p><b>Partially agree</b> - We will continue to evolve our decolonial partnership approach and be open to courageous conversations about the tensions and risk of decolonisation. We will explore what IWDA's 4S framework means to feminist movements including within Australia and define the outer limits of our decolonial pathways. We remain committed to recruiting diverse staff with the skills and experience for feminist movement building and will continue to invest their skills to be able to lead this work.</p>

## **Conclusion**

IWDA's feminist and decolonial approach to partnership offers deep and distinctive value—relationally, operationally, and systemically. While tensions persist in navigating donor-driven systems, IWDA's commitment to mutual learning, power sharing, and transformative change positions it as a trusted and evolving sister organisation in feminist movements. Sustained investment in these principles, and in IWDA's capacity to hold complexity, will be essential for continuing to deliver meaningful value in a shifting global development and feminist landscape.