



SVRI sexual
violence
research
initiative

Strengthening Feminist Grantmaking

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Report by: SVRI

**Co—
Impact**



Introduction

SVRI is a feminist organisation strongly committed to ensuring that certain core principles are upheld in the work we implement, support and carry out in partnership with others. This means our actions and work need to be **feminist-centred, rights-based, innovative, collaborative, equitable and held to the highest ethical standards.**

Over the last two years, in consultation with a wide range of global stakeholders, we have been building on our values-informed approach by developing guidelines we intend to practice and implement in all our grantmaking. We also advocate for other funders to utilise these resources for more efficient and impactful grantmaking. These guidelines focus on [better funding](#) for violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) research in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This is funding grounded in feminist principles, acknowledges and addresses power dynamics, and involves honest, transformative relationships between donors and grantees. The guidelines speak to each stage of a research proposal funding process and provide suggestions for practical actions that support accessible, fair, and equitable processes for priority-driven and impactful research in LMICs conducted by LMIC researchers.

In essence, the guidance maintains that feminist approaches must be infused throughout the life cycle of a grantmaking programme, from inception, through to the selection processes and the research itself. A feminist lens must also inform the partnership between the grant maker and grantee.

The Collaborative Project supported by Co-Impact

SVRI is a learning organisation that foregrounds personal and organisational development through knowledge building and research. During the inception phase of the Collaborative Project supported by Co-Impact, one of the key questions we wanted to address was - *how do we ensure a truly feminist approach to grant making in our own grant-making efforts?*

This involved exploring how to strengthen and improve the grantmaking process for the SVRI team, the reviewers and the applicants for the SVRI grant, with specific attention to application and selection processes. Our specific focus is on improving the application and selection process to make these more equitable and less burdensome to applicants.

Methodology

- We started the process with team discussions on priorities, areas of concern and best approaches to move forward. These were informed by feedback from grantees and highlights from our mid-term evaluation.
- We developed an open-ended survey for a selection of reviewers and ex-reviewers (n=10) who have been involved with proposal review processes at SVRI. The survey was open for three weeks in April and May 2023. We collected five responses.
- Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with applicants for the SVRI Grant:
 - Unsuccessful applicants FGD - in order to select participants, we invited all applicants from the 2021 and 2022 cohort (n=37) who had reached the third and final stage of review. In exchange for their participation, these applicants were offered feedback on their proposals. The FGD was held on 7 July 2023 and while eight people had initially agreed to participate, due to unforeseen obstacles only four attended the FGD.



- Current or past grantees FGD - For this FGD, we invited the entire cohort of grantees from 2021, 2022 and 2023 (n=24). Six of the grantees accepted the invitation with four ultimately attending.

Key Findings

The following four themes were explored in both FGDs – (a) how applicants experience the request for proposal (RFP) process; (b) the application process; (c) the selection and review process; and (d) capacity building. We also asked SVRI grant proposal reviewers to reflect on these processes from both their and the applicants' perspective. A summary of findings from the survey with the reviewers as well as both successful and unsuccessful applicants for the SVRI grant is provided below.

A. Request for Proposal process

We asked participants to provide feedback on their experience of the RFP. We asked them to consider whether the:

- RFP is clear in terms of process, timelines, and expectations.
- Goals and strategy behind SVRI's grantmaking is clearly explained.
- SVRI clearly defines all key terms relevant to the call.
- Eligibility criteria is well explained and transparent.
- SVRI application materials are accessible in different languages and the information on the SVRI website is helpful.

What is working well

A unique funding mechanism globally: Within the global context of limited funding for research on VAW and VAC in LMICs and particularly open, non-specific funding calls, SVRI is filling a very important gap in the field. It remains one of, if not, the only funding mechanism available for locally identified and led research and evidence building for innovation on VAW and VAC prevention and response in LMICs. The fact that this research call encourages partnerships with practitioners is also unique.

Trusted funding partner: Applicants stated being drawn to the grantmaking call due to SVRI's identity and the trust they have in it being a feminist, safe, respectful organisation they feel ideologically aligned with.

Good communications: Information provided by SVRI on the RFP is comprehensive. In particular, participants spoke about the webinars held prior to the application deadline. These webinar presentations are viewed as excellent, providing adequate guidance and ensuring that applicants feel confident in putting together the proposal. In essence, they provide a good idea of what is being asked, what is required, as well as how many grants are going to be awarded. This allows prospective applicants to immediately manage expectations and is seen as a very positive approach, one that is not common among all funders.¹ The webinar held in Spanish is also viewed as extremely useful. Further, respondents

¹ FGD with SVRI grantees, July 11, 2023.



noted that lines of communication were clear, and the website is accessible and easy to navigate in terms of where to search for additional information.² They also noted that the information on other grantee awards is particularly useful in helping organisations to assess their own eligibility and overcome mental blocks around competing with academic research taking place in the field.

Enough time provided: From the time the RFP is launched, sufficient time is built in to prepare for and develop the full proposal.

What could be improved

Notable gaps: There is a perceived disconnect between the RFP and application process. While the RFP refers to feminist values and invites feminist organisations to apply, in the application form nothing is asked about how the team or institution is feminist, or why the research is feminist and how it uses feminist methods. Participants agreed that “just like we (smaller feminist organisations) are being evaluated on technical methods, can technical institutions be asked, how are you being feminist in your approach?”³ In addition, there does not seem to be criteria around gender balance or diversity within teams applying for the grant.

Areas needing clarity: Some FGD participants suggested that while the RFP appears to encourage different methods, the application form leans more towards traditional methods and terminology, favouring a more ‘cut and dried’ approach. In addition, the application form seems to be a very academically oriented, with an emphasis on generating knowledge rather than improving practice through research or evaluating community impact in terms of knowledge and uptake.

Expand the parameters: Participants also stated that it would be useful if the RFP was expansive enough to cover more than public health prevention/response parameters. It would allow proposals on public policy research, such as those linking VAW and VAC to public policy which is a critical area in the field, to be a good fit. Such proposals could include for instance, examining where government money is being spent and linking this to public policy, national plans and implementation.⁴

Research by practitioners: Building evidence needs to include practitioners. In some cases, practitioners may lack the capacity or resources for grant writing in the format required for the SVRI grant. Participants suggested that SVRI should consider a direct call for practitioners or think about how to adjust the application to speak more to practitioner groups.

B. Application process

We asked participants about the application process and specifically the form. In thinking about what worked well and what the main challenges were, we asked them to consider whether:

- The length of the expected proposal is reasonable.
- The questions that applicants are expected to answer are relevant and important to the project.
- Opportunities to communicate and get answers from SVRI team are adequate.
- The time provided from the call announcement to submission deadline is appropriate.
- The process of submitting the form is user friendly.

² FGD with SVRI grantees, July 11, 2023.

³ FGD with applicants for the SVRI grant, July 7, 2023

⁴ FGD with applicants for the SVRI grant, July 7, 2023.



Identifying what information is essential

Asking for what is really needed: We don't want to ask for information that isn't given due consideration or weight and that isn't being fully utilised during a review process. Therefore, we asked previous and current reviewers to consider which sections of the SVRI Research Grant application form (or any research application form) are essential or most helpful when undertaking a proposal review. According to reviewers, of the existing sections, the top three most important sections relate to project aim and objectives, project method and ethical considerations. All respondents indicated these were essential. In addition, the section on outcomes and project background were seen as important.⁵

Reviewers suggested that those relating to the theory of change (ToC), and innovation and contribution, were less necessary for the review. They suggested that the ToC should only be required for intervention research and even then, only as a figure, as opposed to text.

Regarding shortening the form, reviewers noted that all the sections, other than 'methods', could be shortened. They stated "we [the SVRI] should give a list of indicative sub-headings for methods as this helps with the completeness of the account."⁶ Overall, shortening the form would benefit reviewers and, in turn, applicants.

What is working well

Clear Structure of form: Participants indicated that the structure of the application form is clear. There are specific questions with clear descriptions of what is expected, and clear word limits, all of which are very helpful. The budget format is also user friendly.

Using Proposal-Central: The navigation within Proposal-Central - the possibility of saving and moving around sections over time before submission - is excellent. Organisations can also prepare their answers in Word and paste into the relevant sections. This is useful as it allows for team collaboration before one person submits the proposal.

What could be improved⁷

Streamlining the submission process: Whilst participants appreciated the clarity of the application form, they noted the considerable time required to complete it. This is, in large part, due to very particular specifications for each section in the platform, requiring a high level of tech savviness to navigate (as opposed to content related skills). These could be adjusted for an easier and more seamless process.

Tweaking of the application form: Whilst some participants found the word limits useful, others suggested these act as a guideline rather than a cut off mechanism. The current approach is challenging and can increase the work involved in filling the form. Overall, they called for the form to be shorter and the SVRI CV template abandoned, as it is seen as unnecessary work for applicants. Rather, applicants could upload CVs in their own format .

⁵ Only reviewers were asked these questions.

⁶ Survey response data, Reviewer Survey, June 2023.

⁷ FGD's (July 7 and July 11, 2023).



Downloadable form: A downloadable application form would make it easier for applicants to create, edit, and collaborate, while considering the whole picture during the preparation of proposals.⁸ This form, in its entirety, would then be submittable through Proposal-Central.

Risk to applicants: Some researchers, especially in countries where there is government backlash against work in specific fields, would prefer not to have to provide ID numbers and detailed personal identification information so early in the process.

Accessibility: One participant suggested that in addition to English, Spanish and French, we accept proposals in other languages but did not specify which.

C. Selection and review process

For SVRI, strengthening our grantmaking should result in a better experience for all parties. Hence, we considered the selection and review phase from the perspective of both applicant and reviewer. Specific suggestions were made by both groups to improve the experience of all involved.

What is working well

“I love being a reviewer for SVRI so much that I wouldn’t change a thing.”⁹

Positive and affirming process: Overall, reviewers responded positively to the review process used for the SVRI grant, noting the process is straightforward and the discussion around scoring and merits of each proposal clear, transparent, and inclusive. In addition, the option of “being able to suggest modifications to proposals, e.g. budget allocations, not doing certain parts when they are over ambitious”¹⁰ was appreciated as a useful aspect of the process.

Similarly, applicants reported receiving helpful and quick responses to queries, adding that timelines and processes are clearly communicated.

What could be improved

“We would prefer to start with a shorter concept note and then if short-listed, then develop a full proposal; it was a lot of effort and resources for us to get the whole proposal and detailed budget and all partnerships figured out for the application...”¹¹

A two-stage process: Some applicants suggested that a two-stage process would be preferable, helping to conserve scarce human and financial resources, especially for smaller organisations.

Feedback on proposals: Many participants believe feedback on proposals would be extremely helpful. In light of the considerable work that goes into the application and the low success rate, they noted that feedback would enable them to strengthen their work. They would also gain increased clarity on what would improve their chances of success on future grant applications.

⁸ FGD with SVRI grantees, July 11, 2023.

⁹ Survey responses, SVRI proposal reviewers, June 2023.

¹⁰ Survey responses, SVRI proposal reviewers, June 2023.

¹¹ FGD with applicants for the SVRI grant, July 7, 2023.



Opportunities for more discussion among reviewers: Some reviewers suggested their experience could be improved by having more time to discuss proposals in groups, divided over a few stages. This would allow them to consider other perspectives and deepen their understanding and thinking on individual proposals. A related suggestion was to do this in small regional groups in the first phase of reviews.

D. Capacity building

In this section, we explored not our existing process but the possibility of including capacity strengthening and exchange linked to the request for proposals and application process. In this way, when applicants apply for an SVRI grant, there is an opportunity for all applicants to strengthen their skills, expand their networks, or strengthen their proposed research project/proposal, among others. Participants were asked about the nature of support required and if they would commit time to participating in capacity building initiatives before submitting a proposal. This idea elicited strong support from FGD participants who saw particular value in:

Skills and information: Participants welcomed capacity strengthening related to writing proposals. This includes ensuring understanding of the criteria used to evaluate the proposals and discussion about key features of a feminist proposal.

Creating Communities and Networking: The findings highlighted the benefits of being able to meet the cohort of potential applicants, pre-proposal writing, and learning from and exchanging ideas with other researchers who have done or are doing similar work in other contexts. This could encourage relationship building and networking even outside of the SVRI grantmaking process. Participants also felt that being able to see the ideas and meet people involved from early in the process, would help teams evaluate if the process is a good fit for their overall goals. They also suggested that establishing a focal point for each region (drawn from the broader SVRI network), would be beneficial in terms of allowing groups context specific engagement and discussion.

Discussion

Overall, respondents were positive about their experience with the SVRI grantmaking process. Both respondents and reviewers found communication on the processes clear, efficient, and transparent. Applicants identified strongly with SVRI's principles and spoke of the SVRI as a trusted voice in the field.

In terms of strengthening the process, feedback received was both constructive and helpful. It has inspired us to ask:

What is the purpose of the grant? The SVRI grant is to advance research in LMICs to build better, effective and sustainable at scale prevention and response VAW and VAC programmes. Since the grant is intended to fund research and not evaluation, this must be clearly and comprehensively communicated. SVRI supports new ideas and innovative research being done intended to scale, implement and test models that build upon existing evidence. This could include testing new interventions, addressing under-researched areas or scaling of already tested innovations. A proposal focusing on scaling up must involve scaling something that has been tested before but, for instance, adapting it to a new setting or context. We do not support projects that re-examine data already existing



in the field. We plan to make these distinctions clearer in the RFP and can share additional resources with the call, for instance the [IPV-ADAPT+Framework](#).

What do we not fund? Providing further clarity on what may *not* fall within the scope of SVRI funding would also be helpful. For instance, applications for documentation or data collection from crisis areas that will then be used for legal documentation or human rights reports. Whilst critical, these are not viewed as primary research and such proposals are unlikely to be supported. SVRI can, during the introductory webinars, provide illustrative examples of the areas that fall outside of our scope of funding.

What is the role of practice in the SVRI Grant? We believe research generated by LMIC researchers, and co-created with practitioners (programmers) and policy makers who will be vested in using it, has a much more substantial chance of influencing policies and programmes. Therefore, our eligibility criteria requirements include that teams or consortia be locally led, and include researchers, practitioners and other relevant stakeholders (e.g., government, scaling partners, policy makers, etc.) in equitable partnership arrangements. All stakeholders need not be experts in all areas; great research is accomplished when experts from different perspectives come together. To this end, we encourage a partnership model between researchers, practitioners, policymakers etc., especially on intervention evaluations.

How can we strengthen the application and selection process? Several participants (representing both applicants and reviewers) suggested we consider a two-stage application process. This is valid, considering the volume of work involved in writing a research proposal, coupled with the fact that SVRI funds less than 5 percent of all applications. This suggestion benefits reviewers as well who must examine high numbers of applications knowing that very few can be selected. A two-step process, respondents argued, would lead to a small, shortlisted pool of applicants being asked to submit a fully-fledged proposal, substantially raising the chances of success.¹²

However, from experience, SVRI has learned that a two-step approach results in a substantial increase in initial numbers of concept notes. This is likely to exceed our capacity and resources to provide a fair and adequate review. It is arguable that the time required to review these would be offset by less time needed to review fewer full proposals at a later stage. However, writing an excellent abstract or concept note is a skill. Given our commitment to funding innovative research generated from researchers who have not always had strong mentorship in these processes, means that an idea with excellent potential might not make it through the first round of reviews. At this stage, rather than implementing a two-stage process, a better solution would involve shortening the proposal and finding ways to lessen the technical challenges around submitting the application form.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of ensuring our feminist principles are reflected in the RFP and the application form. This means questions about team composition will be an important addition to the application; we will make it clear that this information will be used when evaluating a proposal. Additionally, working with our proposal platform partners to ease technological barriers and adjust

¹² Survey responses, SVRI proposal reviewers, June 2023.



formats or parameters will also be a priority. We anticipate these amendments will decrease the time spent on navigating the actual form and facilitate a seamless experience of submission.

In terms of the **selection phase**, developing more opportunities for reviewers to interact in smaller groups or in regional groups could be feasible. This, however, assumes that individuals are able to commit more time to the process. SVRI can explore this further with reviewers in the future.

We thought a lot about the **request for feedback** in the case of unsuccessful applications. A number of large funding organisations do provide feedback on proposals, but it is not known if every application receives feedback. Either way, it is not within SVRI's resources to do so. Reviewers supported this by noting that providing feedback to everyone is unrealistic, requires a huge amount of work and could potentially open up the organisation to having decisions challenged.¹³ One way to address this challenge is for us to provide more information on the selection process in general. This would include being very transparent about guidelines and success rates, and also raise other considerations such as what it means if a country has had many grants awarded in previous cycles.¹⁴ Another suggestion is to provide a summary of key gaps or common problems noted in unsuccessful applications each year. This would, without needing to address each individual application, support applicants to better understand the decision-making process and provide insight into what areas they could strengthen.¹⁵

We will have the opportunity to test the plan for more **comprehensive and continuous capacity building** during the Collaborative Project and will be learning and disseminating lessons from this. Challenges might include ensuring all applicants have equal opportunities to access information and resources, navigating for instance, time zones, language access etc. While current rules prohibit the sharing of information about applicants who are applying for the same grant, this could be overcome if the networking and sharing part of the process were done at a pre-application phase.

Recommendations

By the end of the Collaborative Project inception period, we had a core goal. This was to have a clear, well-defined set of actions that build upon the funding ethically guidelines. As a part of a feminist approach to grant-making applied to the proposed project, these actions would also address application and selection processes. We are committed to innovation and methods that ease and improve processes for our partners. At the same time, considering the availability and utilisation of resources, SVRI must evaluate all adjustments and ensure all changes remain in line with an ethical, equitable and sustainable approach for all prospective applicants and partners. This has meant after consulting with our partners and identifying the required changes, to find a balance between what is feasible at the time and what can be planned in the future when funds become available. The recommendations below are not exhaustive. Rather, they indicate the key areas that were highlighted during the consultative processes with reviewers and applicants on our grantmaking processes for the SVRI grant. Informed by the issues raised above, we consider these recommendations feasible to carry out in the shorter term.

¹³ Survey responses, SVRI proposal reviewers, June 2023.

¹⁴ Survey responses, SVRI proposal reviewers, June 2023

¹⁵ SVRI team discussions.



Request for proposals

Clarify and strengthen the RFP: Examine the RFP with a view to clarifying the scope of SVRI research funding to avoid confusion. For instance, clarify that SVRI's grant supports research, and this would not include practitioners evaluating their own programme data. In addition, the RFP should include what constitutes good practice. For example, the RFP needs to clarify that SVRI supports new ideas/innovative research that could include testing new interventions, addressing under researched areas or scaling of already tested innovations. It must reiterate that we encourage applicants to apply for the grant to scale, implement and test a model that has already been piloted and to build on what is known. It should be made clear that we do not support projects that re-examine data already existing in the field.

Address the feminist credentials and gender composition of teams explicitly in the RFP: This translates to communicating clearly to applicants that these issues will be given attention during evaluation of proposals.

Provide more resources during the introductory webinars: Provide further clarity on specific aspects such as illustrative examples of what may fall outside the scope of SVRI funding.

Application Process

Shorten the Application: Specific sections of the application form should be removed as they are not critical to the review and decision-making process. In addition, all sections of the application form, other than the methods and the capacity statement, should be shortened.

Address technological challenges in the application process: This would include:

- *Acting on specific technical aspects that are easy to resolve.* Whilst SVRI is not in a position to change the application platform (Proposal-Central), we will explore with Proposal-Central ways to address applicants' challenges such as those related to formats, strict character limits, downloadable application forms etc.
- *Allowing preparation of the form in a downloadable document format:* Creating a downloadable form that can be used to complete the application will make it easier for applicants to create, edit, and collaborate, while considering the bigger picture. These forms can then be uploaded and submitted through Proposal-Central. Emailed forms will not be accepted.
- *Eliminating questions relating to personal detail,* including ID numbers, at the initial stage of the application process.
- *Ensuring that applicants are aware that they may edit on the portal up until the deadline* and encourage, in the guidelines, that as much as possible forms should be uploaded in advance. This is to avoid technical issues at the last minute.

Selection process

Ease the selection and waiting process: Allow applicants to access an online system where they can check on the status of their proposal. We will also ensure that any delays or issues are clearly communicated.



Annual summary: Provide a summary of key gaps and common problems noted in unsuccessful applications each year. This would, without needing to address each individual application, help applicants to better understand the decision-making process and provide insight into what areas they could strengthen.

Provide more information on selection generally: this would mean being very transparent about guidelines and success rates and also raising other considerations such as what it means if a country has had many grants awarded in previous cycles.

Plan a discussion with reviewers: Examine, with the upcoming cohort of reviewers, their interest and availability to discuss modifying the review process. This may mean additional meetings in smaller groups to discuss proposals.

Capacity Strengthening

Implement capacity strengthening ideas for all applicants: This should include providing additional resources such, among others, webinars that build capacity to write successful proposals. The webinars would be comprised of specific sessions linked to sections of the application form such as the literature review, methodology etc. In line with current guidelines and rules, we can also consider enabling engagement among the pre-application cohort, and using this as an opportunity for greater understanding of the 'lay of the land' (organisations, broad proposal themes, regions represented, etc.).

Document and disseminate: We are committed to influencing change in funding practices within this field. To this end, our learnings from this process as well as the impact and experiences of implementing changes should be documented and disseminated in diverse ways to inform the ongoing work.

