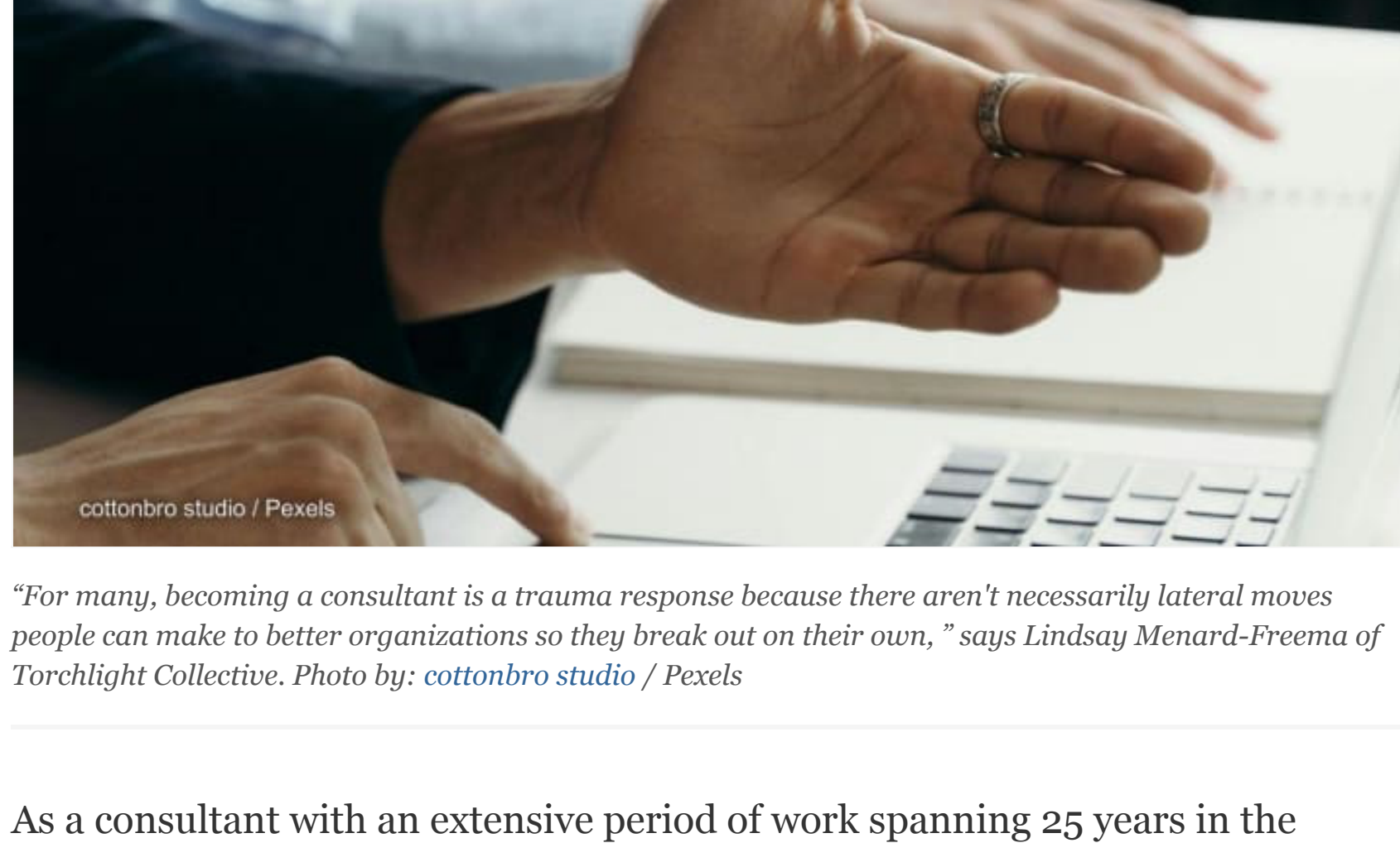


INSIDE DEVELOPMENT CAREER

# Does the consultancy model need an overhaul? These agencies think so

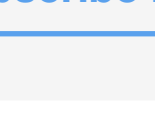
Several women-led organizations are trying to reshape the development consultancy world to address issues such as unpaid assignments, inequitable payment, and consultant burnout.

By **Amy Fallon** // 22 November 2024



*"For many, becoming a consultant is a trauma response because there aren't necessarily lateral moves people can make to better organizations so they break out on their own," says Lindsay Menard-Freeman of Torchlight Collective. Photo by: cottonbro studio / Pexels*

As a consultant with an extensive period of work spanning 25 years in the development space, communications specialist Deborah Walter is used to looking for the next contract while working on the current one. But in the past few years, she has noticed one big trend related to the job search.



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"There seems to be a lack of understanding and under-valuing of consultants' time, energy, and creative intellectual property," South Africa-based Walter, who co-runs social change agency Community Group Productions on the side, told Devex.

In the past, she's been asked to develop a hypothetical communications strategy spanning all regions and industries, social media posts, and talking points for interviews plus proposed campaign brand ideas and initial mock-ups and videos for potential work with several organizations, which, as a busy wife and mother, Walter brands "unreasonable."

As the founder and managing director of recently rebranded social change agency Comotion, one of several women-led organizations now trying to reshape the development consultancy world so that others aren't just talking the talk but are also walking it, Rachel Firth agrees.

"I think we've all likely had experiences of going for job interviews, having to basically write strategies as part of the interview process, then not getting the job, and you're wondering 'Well how many of those ideas are they going to take from that and now use?'" she told Devex.

"That's your intellectual property — and you should be paid for it."

Comotion, a global network of activists, strategists, campaigners, and creatives spanning all regions and fields of work, formerly known as Global Office Consulting and WomenInDev, was set up by London-based Firth in 2015 in response to a traditional consultancy model that she said was broken. Firth's previous experience includes roles with the International Confederation of Midwives, The Wellbeing Foundation Africa, and Worldwide Helpers.

The agency — which offers a range of services from strategy development to proposal writing to training and curricula development and has worked for the Global Fund for Women, the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action, and Mama Cash among others — has committed to paying all of their consultants for any test that they ask them to undertake for any potential work.

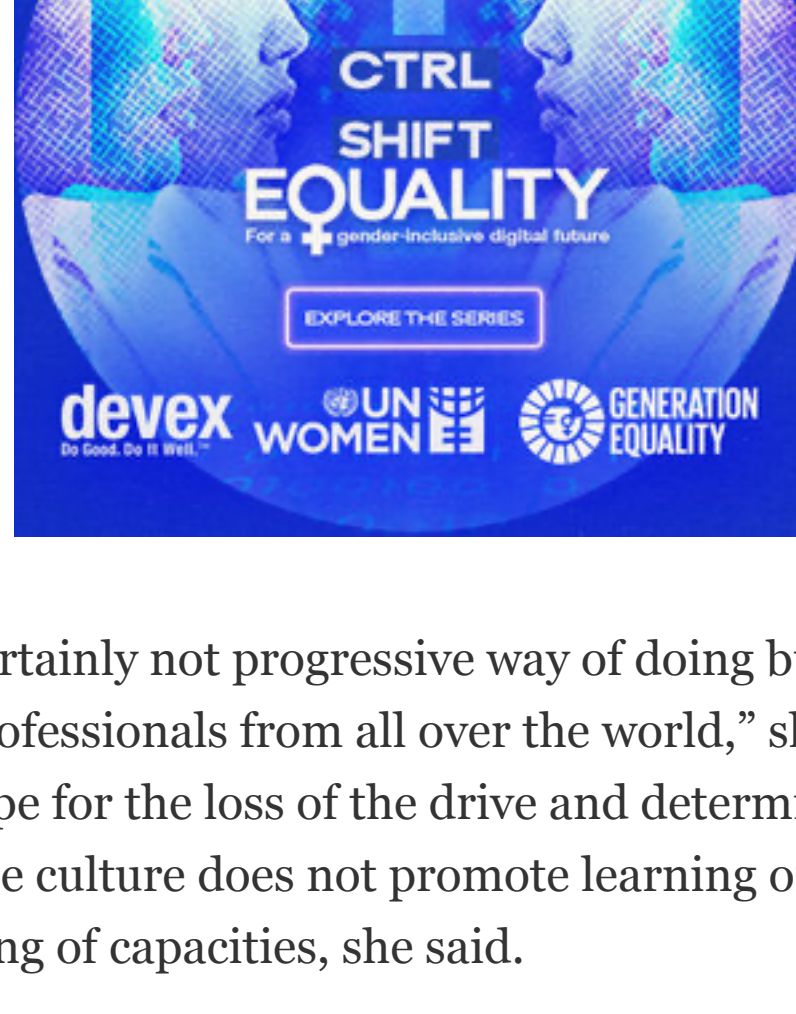
But unpaid assignments are not the only problem that Comotion, which has around 85 consultants listed in the collective, is trying to address. Other issues that they and other nontraditional agencies are trying to address include inequitable payment and consultant burnout.

"The McKinsey's and some of these bigger agencies like Edelman have become attached to charging outrageous prices, for what so many consultants are out in the sector doing and doing incredibly well, and they are as qualified and as experienced as any of those groups," Firth said. "So there's a lot of that that we're trying to challenge."

Walter said that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns pushed a great number of people into digital spaces and communications roles. But the greater availability of online tools and artificial intelligence meant many organizations were taking communications in-house at the cost of quality expertise. Communications budgets were usually among the first areas in organizations to have their budget slashed, she said.

"The digital boom has resulted in fairly small, short-term consultancies, with more people vying for them," Walter said. "There seems to be far less call for more complex communications, for example, communications that reach the most marginalised people."

Another consultant, who spoke anonymously to protect her career, said that for those lucky enough to receive an offer of work after doing unpaid tests, it often entailed filing in a series of documents that need to be signed immediately, often over holiday periods, none of which was recognized or remunerated.



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"It is a regressive, certainly not progressive way of doing business and retaining the most talented professionals from all over the world," she said in an email. "Consulting is a recipe for the loss of the drive and determination you bring when you begin." The culture does not promote learning or retention of talent, let alone the nurturing of capacities, she said.

Ageism was another factor that was obstructive to finding work, she highlighted, with younger contractors being simply cheaper to hire but also potentially "more compliant and obedient if wanting to climb the ladder."

*"Some of these bigger agencies like Edelman have become attached to charging outrageous prices, for what so many consultants are out in the sector doing and doing incredibly well."*

— Rachel Firth, founder and managing director, Comotion

She said regular beat consultants who have demonstrated their skill set and commitment to the organizations they have been repeatedly hired by should have some form of benefits — such as an annual pay increase, be added to the short-lists when jobs are advertised, or after several years automatically become staff members.

Comotion currently has a string of consultants all with lived experience of living or working in the global south on their rota. They are also working with consultants to pitch for new business and ensure that the set rate of the consultant is reflected in the budget as opposed to an afterthought.

"It's not necessarily that we pay everyone the same rate, but rather our starting point is asking consultants what their rate is and adhering to that wherever possible," the collective's associate communications director, Toronto-based Molly Karp told Devex. "If they are perfect for a client, but we can't achieve the rate they want — that's a conversation, but we try to factor their rates in as early as possible in the project design."

Comotion has also developed different types of relationships that they enter into with freelancers and consultants, based on how various members of their community prefer to work. Freelancers and consultants are invited to staff workshops and training in order to be supported in upskilling their network.

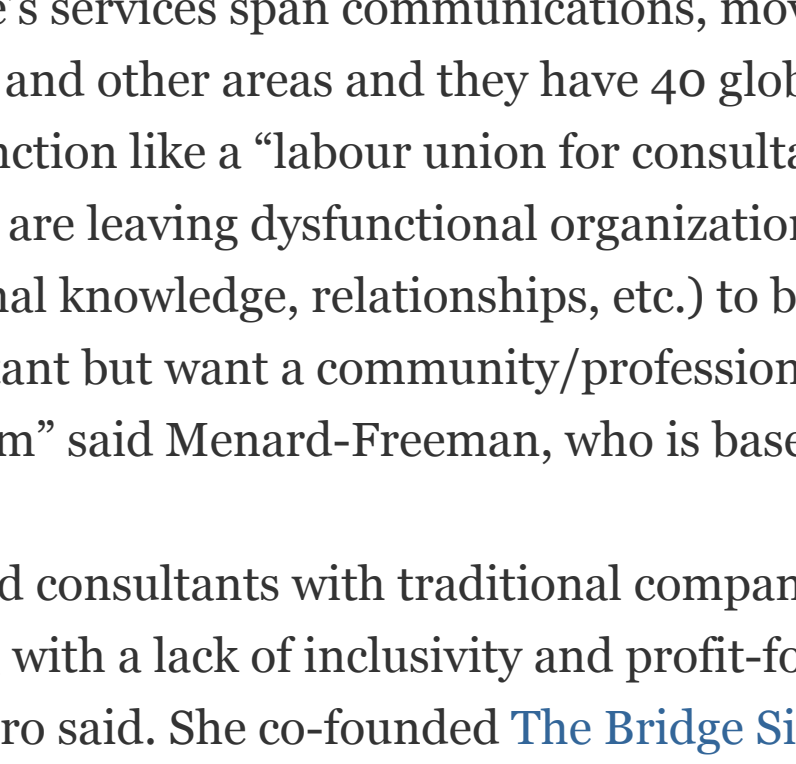
Lindsay Menard-Freeman, who set up a similar agency, Torchlight Collective, nine years ago after stints at the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS and scandal-hit Women Deliver, stressed that so many institutions in the development sector centered their work around women's human rights and gender justice, and had "a workforce comprised of passionate women."

"The entire sector runs on the blood, sweat, tears, and passion of women, especially young women, until it burns them out and there isn't often a solid look at the turnover issues on a systemic level," she said. "While consultants have the ability to dip in and out of problematic institutions, that dysfunction is very often passed down to consultants with fewer labour protections against abusive practices from clients' interdisciplinary team."

Menard-Freeman said that she had observed one trend in the past year.

"A lot of people who are some of the smartest people in the sector are leaving because the conditions of being a staff person are not good, while some of the organizations in the sector essentially crumble," told Devex.

"For many, becoming a consultant is a trauma response because there aren't necessarily lateral moves people can make to better organizations so they break out on their own."

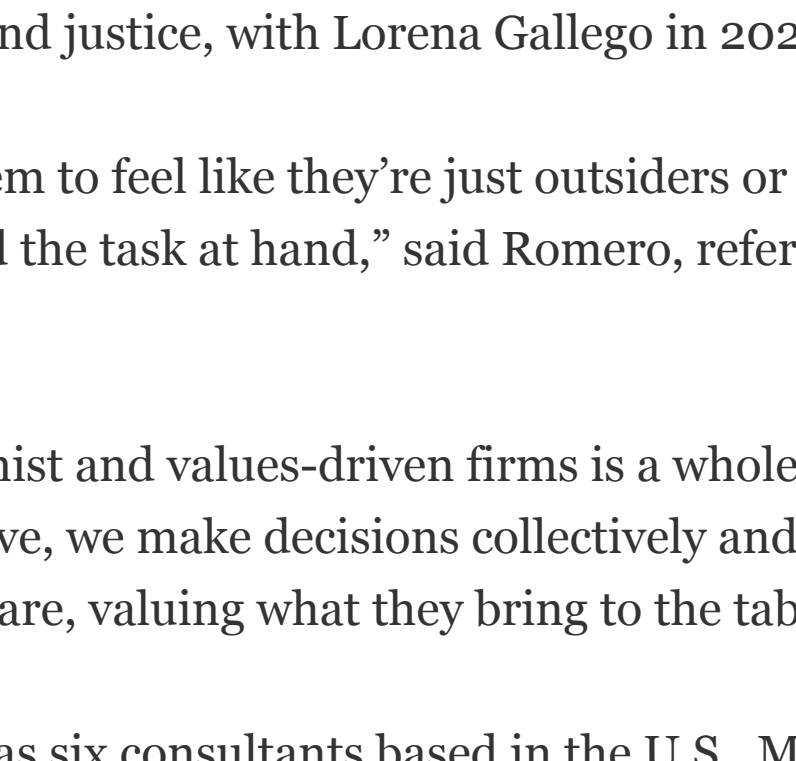


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Torchlight Collective's services span communications, movement-building, research, evaluation and other areas and they have 40 global consultants. But they had come to function like a "labour union for consultants, which has been crucial for folks who are leaving dysfunctional organizations (with a ton of networks, institutional knowledge, relationships, etc.) to become an independent consultant but want a community/professional home/ access to an interdisciplinary team" said Menard-Freeman, who is based in Nashville.

Many freelancers and consultants with traditional companies often end up feeling stuck dealing with a lack of inclusivity and profit-focused mindsets, Lilian Medina Romero said. She co-founded The Bridge Sisters, offering a range of services including communications, policy analysis, and outreach, especially on gender equality and justice, with Lorena Gallego in 2020.

"It's common for them to feel like they're just outsiders or temp voices who aren't valued beyond the task at hand," said Romero, referring to freelancers and consultants.

"Working with feminist and values-driven firms is a whole different vibe as we are more collaborative, we make decisions collectively and relate to consultants as the partners they are, valuing what they bring to the table."

The Bridge Sisters has six consultants based in the U.S., Mexico, and Colombia. They aim to focus on well-being, fair pay, schedule flexibility, and assignments to allow colleagues "to be able to pursue their passions, live their lives, and care for their loved ones, recognizing diverse perspectives, and respecting boundaries and work-life balance."

Localization has become a factor for other agencies, said Denver-based Susannah Hurd, who is chief strategy officer at Global Health Visions, founded in 2008. Their roster consists of a core team plus a vast network of over 100 consultants across the globe.

"We are also looking at ways when there are opportunities and when it makes more sense to partner with an existing organization or consulting firm," she told Devex. "Sometimes a lot of deliverables and expectations are being delivered or designed under very white, Western, global north norms," Hurd added that it was the same for the definition of success.

Unlock Impact is an India-run, women-led social venture focused on gender equality and the climate crisis. Its flagship Comms Ninja, which provides impactful storytelling, communications, and marketing for small and growing businesses, has won the SME Champion: Gender-Responsive Marketplace award at the UN Women WEPs Awards 2021.

Their work is also changing lives, allowing talented women to not only remain in the workforce but to "thrive," said its content marketing manager Shweta Bisht in an email. Since 2018 they've onboarded over 30 women, including 30% from small towns in India, who have experienced a 40% income increase over 2.5 years.

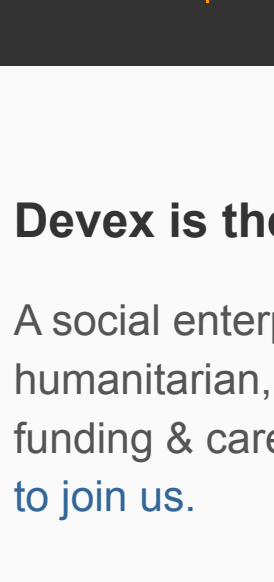
"We are dedicated to addressing the gender work gap in India by providing fully remote, flexible jobs to those who care for the young or elderly; are challenged by health issues; or simply located in smaller towns, away from job prospects," she said.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Amy Fallon** [x](#) [@amyfallon](#)

Amy Fallon is an Australian freelance journalist currently based in Uganda. She has also reported from Australia, the U.K. and Asia, writing for a wide range of outlets on a variety of issues including breaking news, and international development, and human rights topics. Amy has also worked for News Deeply, NPR, The Guardian, AFP news agency, IPS, CitiScope, and others.

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