**Case study 2**

*Saheli* is a women's rights organisation working in rural areas in Bangladesh, on sexual and reproductive health and rights. In this context, sexuality is a taboo topic and open discussions on this issue are difficult. The *Saheli* team, over the past 2-3 years, has noticed that in the villages in its operational area, there is increasing smart phone diffusion and women have started to own their own phones. Last month, representatives from Facebook's Free Basics team in the country approached the organisation and suggested that they enter into a partnership to launch a sexual and reproductive health information service on the Free Basics platform, directed at rural women in Saheli's areas of work. The Free Basics team was also willing to commit to local language interface development and technical support for the tie-up, and wanted the *Saheli* team only to provide expert inputs on content development.

The *Saheli* team was interested. As Free Basics was a zero service platform, this meant that women could access this service without spending any amount from their limited data plans. But being an organisation that carefully thinks through its choices of partners, the Saheli team asked for one month to revert with their response.

The *Saheli* team then started reading more about the terms and conditions of the Free Basics platform, and what digital rights activists have to say about the service. They read that as Free Basics is a privately-owned platform, partnerships can be discontinued at any point. Also, data about user activities on the different services that are part of the Free Basics platforms is tracked and stored by Facebook. These issues worried the team a bit.

The other argument they encountered in their research on the issue – of how Free Basics provided only access to a part of the Internet – they dismissed as being irrelevant. As one staff member put it: *" when there is no water supply, even getting water for 2 hours a day is a good thing. I think that for the women we work with, having some access to the Internet is better than none. But of course, I agree that when we go on our field visits, we should take care to tell the women that what they are accessing is not the full Internet but only a limited part".*

On the first two issues that bothered them – on Free Basics being a private service and user data being stored on Facebook servers – the *Saheli* team had a long and heated internal discussion. They came to the conclusion that these issues are similar to the dilemmas they encounter in partnering with the state in HIV/AIDS awareness programmes – where there is risk to personal information of people living with HIV/AIDS being insensitively handled; and abrupt closure of programmes due to changes in the political situation. The team felt that if they enter into a partnership agreement backed by clear privacy and data protection clauses with the Free Basics team in Bangladesh who seemed to be tuned into the tricky context of working on these issues in Bangladesh, and also sensitive to privacy concerns, they could manage this. They also spoke to some partner organisations in Africa who reported that they have not experienced any untoward incident so far, in similar partnerships with Free Basics in their countries, as on date. Of course, they agreed, actions of private companies are unpredictable, but then so are those of states. And activism and work on the ground is about taking some of these risks to get part of what we want.

*Saheli* decided yesterday to write to Free Basics, accepting the offer of partnership.

**Question:**
**1. Do you think *Saheli* made the right decision? Why/Why not?**