

# RESPONDING TO FEMINIST MOVEMENTS DURING COVID-19

KEY LEARNINGS, REFLECTIONS, AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ASIA AND PACIFIC  
CHAPTER OF THE PROSPERA INTERNATIONAL  
NETWORKS OF WOMEN'S FUNDS



# FULL REPORT





## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report documents the learnings and experiences of eight women's funds in grant management and resource mobilisation with its myriad of grantee partners to address the impact of COVID-19. The eight women's funds are from the Prospera International Network of Women's Funds, Asia, and the Pacific regional chapter. The learnings and experiences captured in this report affirm the key role of women's funds, which is to mobilise and distribute resources to feminist, and women's rights movements. Based on a learning circle methodology, this report explores how women's funds moved quickly and collectively, adapting to a rapidly changing context to ensure support reached those who need it most. The eight women's funds aim to demonstrate through this report that women's funds are, and remain strategic partners during, and beyond the COVID-19 response because they facilitate vital resources to diverse groups and communities, particularly those often disadvantaged by mainstream assistance; and women's funds work is close to the ground, supporting local and sustainable solutions.

## ABOUT THE FUNDS

**Prospera International Network of Women's Funds** is a membership association linking women's funds to promote philanthropy with a feminist perspective. Prospera's mission is to strengthen the work of women's funds to empower women, girls, and trans\* people to transform their lives and communities. The Network brings together women's funds from all over the world to support, identify, prioritise, and implement strategies to mobilise more resources for women and girls' rights. Prospera's Asia and the Pacific regional chapter include eight women's funds based in Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Mongolia, Nepal, South Korea, and Sri Lanka. For more information about the Prospera International Network of Women's Funds please visit: <https://www.prospera-inwf.org/>

**Women's Fund Fiji (formerly Fiji Women's Fund):** Women's Fund Fiji is the Pacific's first national women's fund. We are an empathetic and adaptive feminist fund working to influence and mobilise financial and non-financial resources for feminist and women's rights organisations and movements, so they can progress the human rights of women, girls, and gender non-conforming people in Fiji. The Fund initially began implementation in 2017 as a five-year initiative of the Australian Government's Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (Pacific Women) program and has since become a locally-led independent fund. For more information about the Women's Fund Fiji please visit: <https://fijiwomensfund.org/>

**HER Fund:** Founded in 2004, HER Fund mobilises resources for women's empowerment, the promotion of social changes and gender equality. HER Fund supports the most vulnerable women and girls in Hong Kong by providing capacity building, leadership training and small grants to grassroots organisations led by and serving the most disadvantaged. HER Fund also increases the visibility of marginalised women and girls and the issues they face. For more information about HER Fund, please visit: [URL](#)

**Korea Foundation for Women:** The Korea Foundation for Women was established in December 1999, as the first independent non-profit women's foundation in Korea, by the initiatives and firm commitment of 124 women's groups and leaders of Korean society to realize "A New Millennium for Our Daughters." For more information about the Korea Foundation for Women, please visit: [URL](#)

**Mongolian Women's Fund:** The Mongolian Women's Fund (MONES) supports women's rights activism in Mongolia in several programmatic areas, including women's rights related to climate change and environmental justice. MONES provides grants as well as capacity building support, in collaboration with Mongolian environmental experts, to its grantee partners working on these issues. For more information about MONES, please visit: [URL](#)

**South Asia Women Foundation India:** The South Asia Women Foundation India (SAWF IN) is the only women's fund in India. SAWF IN supports individuals and organisations working towards the advancement of women and trans\* rights in the country and aims to advance women's rights by facilitating the flow of resources to areas and

constituencies that are most in need of flexible, sustained support. For more information about SAWF IN, please visit: [URL](#)

**Tewa (Nepal women's fund):** Tewa means, "support" in Nepali. Tewa's philosophy is to develop community philanthropy for self-reliant development, and for the empowerment of emerging groups of women in Nepal. With this philosophy in mind Tewa does local fund-raising, gives grants to women's groups in Nepal. For more information about Tewa please visit: [URL](#)

**Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Asia, and Pacific:** The Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Asia and Pacific (UAF A&P) supports the resilience of women and non-binary human rights defenders by strengthening and sustaining webs of security and care. UAF A&P strategies are multifaceted and linked to a transformative agenda of achieving social justice, building a solidarity economy and re-imagining cultures, including the culture of giving in Asia and the Pacific. For more information about UAF A&P please visit: [URL](#)

**Women's Fund Asia:** Women's Fund Asia (WFA) is a regional women's fund, working across 18 countries in Asia,<sup>1</sup> with a vision of a just, gender equal, and democratic region in which women, girls, trans, and intersex people's participation, leadership and enjoyment of their human rights is ensured and irrevocable. WFA's programming includes multi-level Grantmaking, Linking and Learning, and Influencing Philanthropy, to enable increased access to long-term and flexible resources at local, national, and regional levels, advancing feminist agendas. For more information about WFA, please visit: [URL](#)

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<sup>1</sup> WFA's geographical scope includes the following countries in Asia: South Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan; South-East Asia: Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam; and East Asia: Mongolia

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The consultancy team comprised **Iris Low** and **Leaine Robinson**, Fiji based development consultants. Chapter member representatives and Prospera Asia Pacific Women's Fund Co-Coordinators oversaw the COVID-19 Learning Circle process.

The consultants are deeply grateful to representatives from the eight women's Funds of the Prospera Asia and the Pacific regional chapter for the time provided to the consultants to share documents as well as participate in the Learning Circle workshops on grant management and resource mobilisation. The information shared during the document review process and at the Learning Circle workshops has contributed greatly to understanding women's funds partnerships, networks, mandate and the impact they have had in mobilising resources and grant management to support grassroots women's, girls', and trans\* organisations and movements to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The consultants are inspired by the passion and commitment of the women's funds and impact the women's funds have had in the Asia Pacific region since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the lessons learned along the way that is informing their long-term strategies for resource mobilisation and recovery efforts.

Special thanks to **Michelle Reddy**, *Women's Fund Fiji Fund Manager*; **Judy Kan**, *Executive Director HER Fund*; and **Chhavi Doonga**, *Senior Program Officer Prospera Secretariat* for guiding, facilitating and supporting introductions to the women's funds; and for overall support and guidance during the conduct of the Learning Circle consultancy.

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# ACRONYMS

COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
FDPF	Fiji Disabled Peoples Federation
WFF	Women's Fund Fiji
GiHA	Gender in Humanitarian Action
GBV	Gender Based Violence
KFW	Korea Foundation for Women
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex or Questioning
MONES	Mongolian Women's Fund
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SAWF IN	South Asia Women Foundation India
UAF A&P	Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Asia and Pacific
WFA	Women's Fund Asia
WFO	Women Focused Organisation
WHO	World Health Organisation





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the key findings, learnings, and recommendations for the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) learning circles commissioned by the Prospera International Network of Women's Funds: Prospera Asia and Pacific Chapter of Women's Funds.

Prospera's Asia and the Pacific regional chapter includes eight women's funds:

- 1) Women's Fund Fiji (WFF)
- 2) HER Fund
- 3) Korea Foundation for Women (KFW)
- 4) Mongolian Women's Fund (MONES)
- 5) South Asia Women Foundation India (SAWF IN)
- 6) Tewa
- 7) Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Asia and Pacific (UAF A&P)
- 8) Women's Fund Asia (WFA)

Independent consultants Iris Low and Leaine Robinson of CoLAB, a Fiji based development consultancy, facilitated the COVID-19 learning circle process from March to April 2021.



# COVID-19 learning circle background, purpose, scope and methodology

Since December 2019, nations around the world have been battling the aggressive spread of COVID-2019. As of 1 March 2021, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported 113 million people infected and 2.5 million deaths.<sup>2</sup> With vaccination roll out a year after COVID-19 started spreading across the world, governments are still implementing lockdown policies such as social distancing measures, closure of non-essential businesses, movement restrictions, and closure of schools.

Research shows that in an emergency, pre-existing gender inequality and discrimination is further exacerbated due to sudden shifts in gender roles and relations. Gendered social norms affect women's and girls' ability to make decisions, to propose solutions, and to lead, constraining women's lives and choices. The pre-existing systemic inequalities that women's human rights defenders and feminists have fought against for years are emerging, and are evident than ever before.

In this current context, women's funds around the world are stepping up to

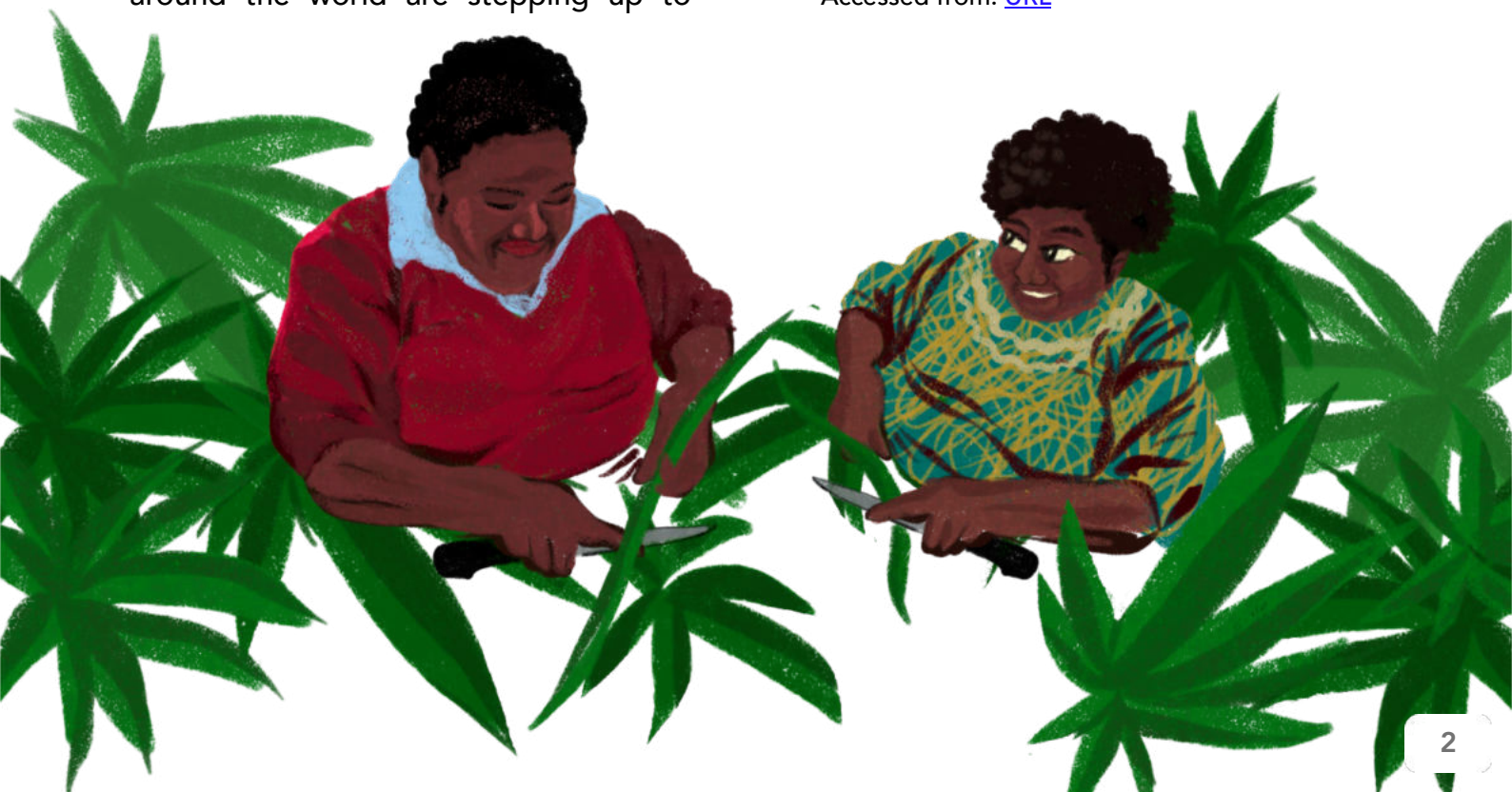
stand with and support women through the COVID-19 crisis. In an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, governments around the world are making difficult economic decisions, generally without taking into account people's social and economic needs. In most places, government responses undermine human rights, particularly those of girls, women, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex or Questioning (LGBTIQ) people, migrants, informal workers, sex workers, people of color, indigenous peoples and isolated rural communities; in other words, groups and populations that were already at risk of increased violence and marginalisation.<sup>4</sup> Women's funds are mechanisms dedicated to support

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<sup>2</sup> WHO COVID-19 Dashboard Accessed from: [URL](#)

<sup>3</sup> Learning Circle Concept Note and Terms of Reference 26 November 2020

<sup>4</sup> Prospera Network responds to COVID-19. Accessed from: [URL](#)





women, girls, including marginalised, and at risk population groups who often do not qualify for government or international funding support.

Each of the eight women's funds of the Prospera Asia and the Pacific regional chapter have worked with its myriad of grantee partners in a range of ways to address the impact of COVID-19. The diversity of grantee partners provides the women's funds with an opportunity to reflect and document ways in which women's funds have continued to work toward its mandate of influencing the feminist architecture of funding for more equitable and just resource distribution.

The learning circles had a central focus on the key role of women's funds, which is to mobilise and distribute resources to feminist, and women's rights movements. The purpose of the learning circles is twofold:

- 1) To facilitate cross sharing and cross learning amongst the eight women's funds members of the Prospera Asia and the Pacific Network around COVID-19 programming, in particular the thematic areas of grant management and resource mobilisation in a COVID-19 heavy context.

- 2) Based on the learning circles and review of key documentation, develop a strategic report document on key

lessons, challenges and emerging themes, including recommendations for action that arise from the discussions.

The learning circle process employed a participatory and iterative approach to enable a flexible information discovery process in which the targeted women's funds, and local knowledge and experiences was reconstructed through a cycle of data collection and analysis to inform shared learning and future programming. The process was grounded in a feminist approach, particularly collaborative knowledge building to highlight the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and what it means for the work of women's funds systems, processes, and ways of working including with grantees.

Key guiding questions were developed to guide data gathering and analysis. The learning circle process used the following data collection methods to answer the key questions:

- 1) Document review: desk review of all relevant Prospera International Asia Pacific Chapter Asia Pacific Women's funds documents; literature review of secondary data to understand the context on how COVID-19 has impacted women, girls and trans\* people and their communities.





- 2) Pre-learning circle meeting with Co-coordinators and Prospera Staff: a pre-learning circle virtual meeting was held with the Chapter member representatives before the scheduled learning circles to finalise and agree to the key guiding questions and format of the workshops.
- 3) Virtual learning circle workshops– the learning circle workshops were held over two days and included participatory sessions that were guided by a set of questions to help bring focus and structure to the discussions. A total of 16 participants attended the learning circle workshops. There were two workshops, focused on the two thematic learning areas prioritised by

women’s funds: 1) grant management and 2) resource mobilisation. The eight women’s funds self-selected which workshop to attend. Some women’s funds attended both workshops and some attended only one workshop. Findings under each thematic area are based on the learnings and examples shared by the participants (women’s funds) that attended the respective workshops.

- 4) Validation meeting- to present the draft findings and recommendations to the eight women’s funds for sense-making and validation.
- 5) Post learning circle meeting with Co-coordinators and Prospera Staff: to present the final strategic document;



outcomes from the consultancy; and remaining issues/expectations/clarifications before the consultancy ends.

The analysis process was based on three key approaches:

- 1) An analysis matrix that mapped the analysis process and was used to answer the key questions.
- 2) Theme analysis to categorise patterns that emerged from data collection in relation to key guiding questions. In particular, this approach was helpful to process qualitative results around intended or unintended outcomes; recommendations, and areas for improvement.
- 3) Comparative analysis to compare women's funds responses to the same questions; identify issues, areas where women's funds feel the same or different (such as views about the role and contribution of women's funds to address the impacts of COVID-19; effective resource mobilisation and grant management approaches; and identifying country specific COVID-19 priorities).

Data was synthesised using these approaches to generate key learnings, themes, including recommendations for action identified by the women's funds.



# WHAT THE LEARNING CIRCLE PROCESS FOUND: Women's funds key learnings on grant management

The eight women's funds had to adapt, use existing approaches, and develop its COVID-19 response grant funding mechanisms to be able to respond rapidly to the profound social and economic impact of the pandemic throughout the region. For some funds, this was the first time initiating emergency-response grant-making. The women's funds were among the first to mobilise, recognising that a crisis of such magnitude required a collaborative effort and decisive response. The eight women's funds employed various grant management responses:

- **Making structural adjustments to grant-making practices and providing flexible grants:** By listening to its grantees and the women, girls and trans\* community on the ground, the women's funds were able to provide flexible and targeted grants. Knowing that in the region government responses to COVID-19 undermined human rights and did not take into account the needs of women, girls, LGBTIQ people, migrants, informal workers and isolated rural communities, often excluding entire communities from relief and rehabilitation efforts, the women's funds were able to meet some of those immediate needs by repurposing existing grants; supporting women's groups to change their interventions focusing

on COVID-19 activities of grants disbursed before the pandemic; establishing new emergency grants; and funding streams.

- **Addressing how the different forms of discrimination intersect with and amplify gender-based discrimination:** The data, information, and real-life stories that the women's funds gathered from its different data collection approaches became the basis for its targeted and intersectional grants. Women's funds supported operational costs of grantee partners while at the same time enabling grantee partners to provide direct relief supplies, support to enable counselling services to continue as essential services, supporting women's small businesses, and targeting social protection schemes for those experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of vulnerability, such as from gender, race, age, and economic status. While the grantee partners were moving to address immediate lifesaving needs, the root causes of gender inequality were not lost and feminist principles were upheld.

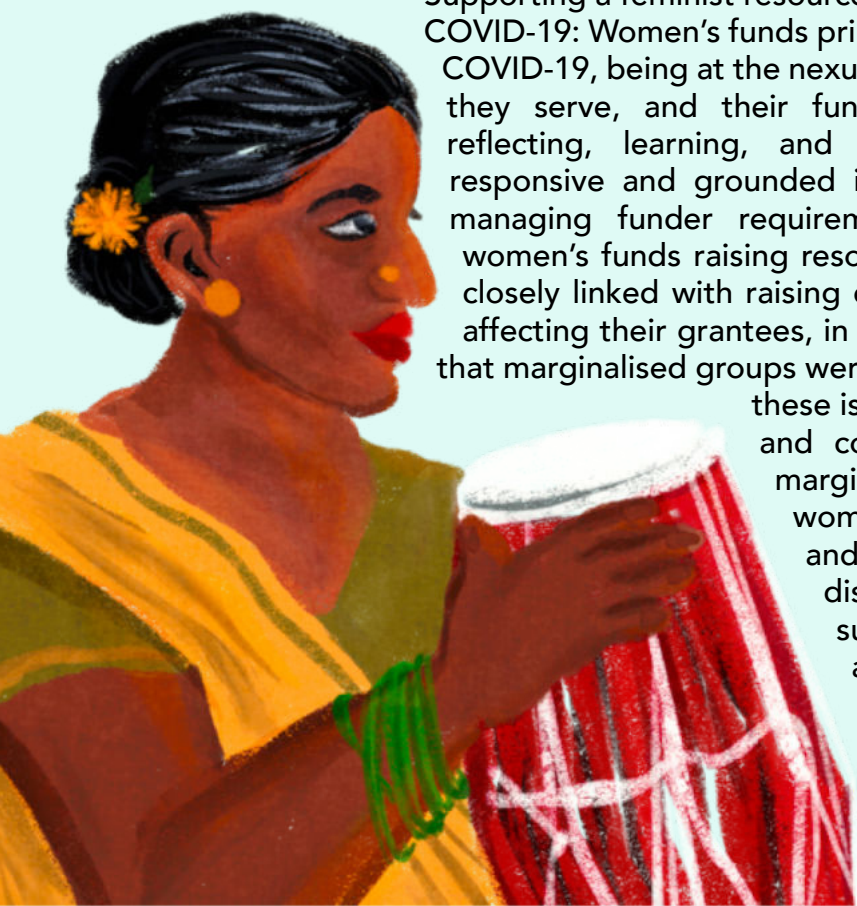





- **Awareness raising and disseminating life-saving information:** A key issue shared by the women’s funds is that there were groups of people that could not access nor understand the information about the pandemic, including how to protect themselves and others, and the nationwide restrictions and the impact that had on their work, families, and communities. For each of the women’s funds, they played a key role in ensuring their staff and grantees had access to timely and accurate information about the pandemic. This was done through regular phone calls, online meetings and supporting radio advertisements and pamphlets for information dissemination. Lack of information and misinformation not only reduces wellbeing, but it can also have deadly consequences, and getting the information available in a language and format that all people can fully access and understand was important.
- **Key messages shared by women’s funds based on their learnings and experiences in giving grants during the COVID-19 pandemic:**
  1. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities and the needs of women and girls, and added new operational challenges for women’s funds.
  2. Movement building and collective action builds resilience.
  3. Long-term support is critical for effective COVID-19 response and recovery.
  4. Psychosocial support and mental health care and wellbeing is important in a crisis.
  5. Women’s funds used the urgency of the crisis as an opportunity to strategise.
  6. Women’s funds need to broaden their funding base to raise unrestricted funding.

## Women’s funds’ key learnings on resource mobilisation

- Supporting a feminist resource mobilisation agenda during and beyond COVID-19: Women’s funds principles and capacities were tested during COVID-19, being at the nexus between the grantees and communities they serve, and their funders, women’s funds were constantly reflecting, learning, and strategising to ensure support was responsive and grounded in the realities of their grantees, while managing funder requirements and restrictions. For the eight women’s funds raising resources in a COVID-19 heavy context was closely linked with raising concern and awareness about the issues affecting their grantees, in particular making more visible the issues that marginalised groups were facing and advocating for resourcing of these issues to support women and trans\* rights and communities that are most at risk and marginalised from mainstream funding. While women’s funds continue to work individually and collectively to raise resources, and disburse COVID-19 emergency grants and support, they remain focused on the work ahead, in supporting resilience beyond COVID-19.



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- **Placing people at the centre of resource mobilisation: holistic resourcing to grantee partners:** Having a deliberate and intentional focus on people and their wellbeing based on trusted and strong connections to the local communities they serve, has enabled women's funds to provide holistic support to their grantees. The theory of change for women's funds in mobilising holistic support is that the range of support- from material, safety and security, care, and wellbeing grants, to rapid response grants, all contribute to building the resilience and sustainability of grantees over time, building partnerships and influencing stakeholders such as funders, allies to appreciate people in all their diversity, and to address their needs and priorities in a more holistic and long-term manner. This approach is at the core of women's funds resource mobilisation and grant-making, and became a more pertinent approach to take in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure support addressed the multifaceted needs of grantee partners.

- **Women's funds utilise multiple strategies to mobilise resources:** The eight women's funds raised a total additional funding of US\$2,342,483 million to respond to COVID-19. This does not include existing grants where women's funds repurposed funding to address COVID-19 related activities identified by grantees. Key strategies included:

1. Mobilising and distributing resources from within by adapting existing grants and working with existing grantees to repurpose and reallocate funding to be responsive to grantee need
2. Leveraging resources amongst women's funds to support each other
3. Raising external funds
4. Influencing funders
5. Resourcing grounded in grantee realities and evidence base



# RECOMMENDATIONS: What we can do as Women's Funds

- **Continue to prioritise collective and self-care:** Collective and self-care is a form of resilience and amid turmoil, is a powerful form of resistance.
- **We need each other and must continue to build a stronger solidarity network, including re-thinking how we connect and stay in touch:** Women's funds are connecting digitally out of necessity and will continue this to stay connected, to continue movement building and organising. In the COVID-19 era with physical distancing and travel restrictions a continued reality, communication, and relationships are so important to help address the crisis we are facing.
- **Stay in the problem a bit longer - analyse, reflect, listen deeply to partners, and then develop our strategies as a Women's Fund:** Listening to our grantees, our partners, has served us well in building trust and credibility over time, helping to create powerful alliances and a united voice on issues. We need to continue to document our experiences and learnings as women's funds, and create safe, engaging spaces for conversations with our grantees, communities, and partners so that we remain responsive to their needs. This approach is also important to help ensure the sustainability and vibrancy of our movement over the long-term.
- **Do not lose focus of the other issues impacting our communities:** As women's funds we know that other key issues such as violence against women, health issues, and access to justice existed before COVID-19 and have been exacerbated during the pandemic. We must not lose sight of these issues and must continue to take an intentional, long-term view of the problem so that we can effectively influence and talk about where resources are going and need to go.
- **Negotiate with our donors differently:** Funders had restrictions on funding, leaving critical gaps, particularly around the need for core support and funding that meets our needs as women's funds, and the needs of women's groups and collectives. Due to funding restrictions, we overtly worked with our past and current grantees. We need to broaden our funding base. As feminist funds individually or collectively we will continue to advocate for funding that truly meets our needs and collaborate and negotiate with our funders for more harmonised and transformative funding approaches.



# RECOMMENDATIONS: For Funders

- **Fund women, trans\* and marginalised groups through unrestricted funding:** The impact of COVID-19 is global, its effects are widespread, and no country or community, regardless of social, economic or political status has been exempted by the pandemic. However, the pandemic has had disproportionate impact on women (in all their diversities) and marginalised groups. It is important for funders to know this and to know how support through a women's fund facilitates the much needed, and in most cases life-saving support to these groups. Unrestricted funding enables women's funds to respond rapidly and flexibly, to decide where resources need to be spent, which is often on the issues that are under-dressed or overlooked, and marginalised groups.<sup>5</sup> This is even more pertinent in a COVID-19 climate where groups and organisations are adapting to a constantly changing context.
- **Allocate resources for grantee capacity development and institutional strengthening of women's funds:** Connected to unrestricted funding is the need for funding that supports the growth, development, and sustainability of women's funds and their grantees. Unrestricted funding targeted at developing both grantee and women's funds organisational and programming capacity enables responses that are more flexible, strengthens local organisations, resulting in more vibrant organisations and more effective programming being delivered.
- **Continue to support women's funds beyond COVID-19:** The impacts of the pandemic are long-term. Core, flexible, long-term funding support directly for feminist groups is even more critical than before, particularly in contexts where human rights, good governance, and democracy are under threat. With limited appropriate resourcing (financial and non-financial), women's funds will continue to be challenged with responding to immediate emergency and humanitarian support and the long term support aimed at systemic and structural changes. As reflected by a women's fund representative during the workshop, "It is important for funders to continue to invest in women's rights work, during this time and beyond COVID-19". Existing literature also highlights the value of investing in women's funds: "Women's funds are the drivers of collective



<sup>5</sup> Mama Cash- Investing well in the right places: why fund women's funds. 2015. Accessed from: [URL](#)



action.....more funding to women’s rights groups, organisations and movements is needed but donors cannot always reach those doing critical work. Women’s funds are the mechanism to do so and work with a view to the long-term goal of securing rights for all women, girls and trans\* groups”.<sup>6</sup>

- **Adopt a more rights-based approach to funding:** The eight women’s funds strongly assert that all resource mobilisation should employ a rights based approach, an approach that is also shared by funders.
- **Continue to have funding dedicated specifically for humanitarian and emergency assistance (including COVID-19 response, natural disasters or any kind of crises), but balance this with a continued focus on funding for gender equality and women’s rights:** There is a risk that programs focused on key national gender-equality issues may lose momentum, pushed to the back burner, or run out of monetary support before they can be completed.<sup>7</sup> With COVID-19 causing major setbacks on gender equality gains, the need for funders to invest in long-term, flexible funding to groups like women’s funds that espouse feminist and social justice principles and values is now needed more than ever before.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> WHO COVID-19 Dashboard Accessed from: [URL](#)





## SETTING THE CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems, and the world of work. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating, tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year.<sup>8</sup> Millions of small businesses face existential threats, with billions of people losing or have reduced work and at risk of losing their livelihoods. Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable as they lack social protection and access to health care and superannuation. Without the means to earn an income during lockdowns, many are unable to feed themselves and their families. For most, no income means no food, or, at best, less food and less nutritious food.

Women, girls, trans\*, and intersex people and other marginalised and vulnerable groups bear the brunt of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Across all regions, there has been an increase in authoritarianism, militarisation, and control over populations under the guise of enforcement of social distancing measures. During a crisis, marginalised groups face increased vulnerabilities, from heightened risk of infection, through to neglect and violence. Cases of gender violence during lockdown and curfews have increased. In five Pacific island countries, as lockdowns took effect, UN Women immediately surveyed crisis centres, confirming a major increase in calls to their helplines reporting Gender Based Violence.

At the Learning Circle workshops, representatives of the Prospera Women's Fund Asia and the Pacific regional chapter shared how government responses undermined human rights and did not consider socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, in particular the needs of girls, women, LGBTIQ people, migrants, informal workers, sex workers, and isolated rural communities; groups and populations that were already at risk of increased violence and

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<sup>8</sup> World Health Organisation. 2020. Impact of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods, their health and our food systems. Accessed from: [URL](#)



marginalisation. Women and girls with disabilities face additional, gendered risks, particularly sexual violence, and isolation with abusive carers and/or family members. With quarantine and social isolating measures, women and girls have even less access to outside support and help as services and facilities are closed.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore critical to consider the specific risks and increased vulnerabilities of those who face multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation including gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, poverty and geography.

The immediate economic impact was felt by women and trans\* people working in sectors vulnerable to the pandemic including tourism and small business. This was furthered exacerbated by country lockdowns where countries across the world were at a standstill for months with only essential services operating. This increased women's responsibility of child-care, with reduced or loss of livelihoods, challenged food security and accessing health services, increased violence against women, girls and trans\* people, and even increased cyber-crimes and hatred towards women on social media.

While the pandemic heightens the needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls, Women-Focused Organisations (WFO) and women's funds that serve them have experienced severe operational and funding challenges. According to an

analysis of data available on Devex's funding platform, funding commitments to combating COVID-19 from January 2020 to April 2021 show funding commitments exceeding US\$21.3 trillion through awarded contracts, grants, new programs, tenders, and open funding opportunities to sectors such as education, economic, food security, health, gender, protection.<sup>10</sup>

However, data shows persistent underfunding to initiatives for gender equality and for gender based funding prevention and response in humanitarian action globally.<sup>11</sup> The Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group conducted an analysis of 20 humanitarian and multi-sector plans in response to COVID-19 across the Asia-Pacific region. In less than half of the documents assessed (45–50%) mention the collection and use of sex, age, and disability disaggregated data and the need to conduct gender analysis. Gender analysis and sex, age, and disability disaggregated data is vital to improve the quality of responses and to meaningfully inform response and planning processes. One quarter (25%) of the plans assessed by GiHA makes no mention of any form of engagement of women's group and networks, or women's leadership in planning and implementation.<sup>12</sup> As early as April 2020, 71% of WFOs' reported that COVID-19 was affecting them somewhat or very negatively, with 12% suspending activities altogether.

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<sup>9</sup> Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development. 2020. Thematic Brief: Gender and COVID-19. Accessed from: [URL](#)

<sup>10</sup> Devex (21 April 2021) Interactive: Who's funding the COVID-19 response and what are the priorities? Accessed from: [URL](#)

<sup>11</sup> Gender in Humanitarian Action Asia and the Pacific (2020) Closing the Funding Gap for Women-Focused Organisations Responding to COVID-19 in Asia and Pacific

<sup>12</sup> Ibid



## Impact of COVID-19 identified by women's funds

### Food InSecurity

- Farmers not able to transport and sell produce at markets
- Loss of income led to inability to buy food
- Daily wage worker groups suffering from hunger

### Cyber crimes

- Increase in cyber sexual violence with the movement to a digital society
- Sexual minority hatred, discrimination and crime online getting harsher
- Movement to online platforms increased risk of digital security
- Digital gap for grassroots women and women with disability

### Violence and Control

- Surge in domestic violence and partner violence
- Lack of services to respond to violence as service providers were running thin on resources

- Income and livelihoods lost led to mobility to find other livelihoods which led to harassment (state-led and community violence) due to movement
- Increase in authoritarianism, militarisation and control over populations under the guise of enforcement of social distancing measures
- Increase in under age marriage of girls
- Militarisation, in many cases, translated into law enforcement related abuses and increased human rights violations

### Livelihood

- Those with small businesses could no longer operate, pay rent
- Massive losses of jobs (livelihoods), daily wage labourers lost jobs -
- Without income, people could not afford medical services or food.
- Women in the informal sector disproportionately impacted
- Increasing burden of unpaid care work



- Nationwide curfews impacted on ways to earn income
- Informal sector did not benefit from government supplementary budget which allowed those in the formal sector to access their superannuation
- People looking at securing traditional land and going into farming
- Work and money suddenly dried up

### **Women, Trans and other minority groups**

- Barriers to accessing life-saving messages and information on COVID-19
- There is no legislation in Korea that protects minority groups such as trans\* women
- Single migrant women and trans\* women excluded from government support in Korea as response programs focused on households
- Fiji's supplementary budget for

COVID-19 response resulted in approximately 50% decrease in funding for disability sector which impacted the Disabled Person's Organisation's ability to pay people

- Work burden of women who were working - to take care of family after work
- Digital divide for marginalised groups
- Women could not afford masks so did not buy and use them
- Transgender women and men who depend on hormonal medicine could not access this
- Psychological impact of the crisis led to suicide: Tewa reported 11 cases in the LGBTIQ community
- In India there was a requirement to provide documentation of need, which a lot of community groups did not have
- Unprofessional, degrading treatment of pregnant women for COVID-19 test



## Grantee Operations

- Donors providing COVID-19 response funding did not want to cover core operational costs of grantee partners
- Grantee partners were really getting burnt out as no money was set aside for any coaching, counselling or time out as donors did not want to allocate funds for this
- Emotionally and physically exhausted being frontline responders
- High levels of stress
- Health insurance for Non-Governmental Organisation workers becoming a need
- Overwhelming need for coverage of operational (rent, salary, utility) costs
- Operations moved online and staff worked from home
- Unfamiliar online world and Women's funds relied on younger staff for orientation to the new online platforms that were introduced
- Lack of access to internet and phone credit

## Health

- Loss of income made medical services and resources inaccessible and unaffordable
- Sexual reproductive health services became non-essential services
- Marginalised groups excluded from information provided by government and excluded from aid that they had a right to which increased their health risks
- Lack of materials for masks
- In Nepal, community schools were impacted by lack of sanitary materials and water

## Prospera Women's Fund Asia and Pacific Chapter

- Challenging trying to gather and verifying data due to connectivity, curfew
- Initially could not get new resources so made amendments to existing grants to make it work in the changed context
- Had to mobilise resources online to help partners
- Operations moved online and staff worked from home
- Seeing the impact across the world caused panic amongst staff due to the uncertainty
- Felt pressured on what to do
- Took stock of own work including small grants and how to keep flexible
- Had to figure out how to make resources flow in an easy way but have grant management rigour in place
- Had to really listen hard to the impact of COVID-19 on women and trans\* groups and engaging in that process and trying to influence, where possible, where funds had to go, not just through women's funds but other funders
- Had to postpone / reschedule / change scheduled programs and this was a lot of work to communicate at all levels and then look at alternative ways to work
- Staff were burnt out
- Had to keep on top of the changing guidelines and restrictions by government to be able to communicate that to grantees
- Fatigue by online platforms and wanting to connect at a human level
- Feeling that needs were so much but could not support everything



# At the Learning Circle workshops, women's fund representatives shared other impacts

- The disparity between who had resources and who did not have, the rich and the poor was evident- as rich people have more access to medical services that can keep them safe and poor people did not, those with less money had to continue to go to work to find ways to support their families/communities.
- State authorities used the pandemic as an opportunity to seize power by restricting what people could and could not do which prevented or limited the work of activists and human rights defenders.
- Disasters in Fiji and India further exacerbated the impact of COVID-19.
- Those communities located inland did not understand the nationwide restrictions or understand the COVID-19 situation.
- Sudden lockdown and rumours caused panic, fear, and hoarding of food and sanitary supplies.
- Digital inequality became evident between those that had access to the internet and were digitally well informed, compared to those that were not. People who had the resources and capability were able to access online platforms, adjusting their work and schooling. Minority groups especially migrant women and those in poor work conditions could not access technology, and if they did have access, they did not know how to use the technology. An additional impact of the digital divide was on children's education, in particular girls dropping out of school because of unequal access and capacity.
- COVID-19 brought social distancing and the lack of human contact left people questioning how to connect with people in person, as a community and society. However as shared by women's fund SAWF IN, in India, houses are already far apart in the rural areas so social distancing and mobility restrictions affected those in the urban areas more.
- In India, COVID-19 started in urban areas and the national lockdown triggered an interstate mass movement of thousands of wage workers escaping unemployment and food insecurity.



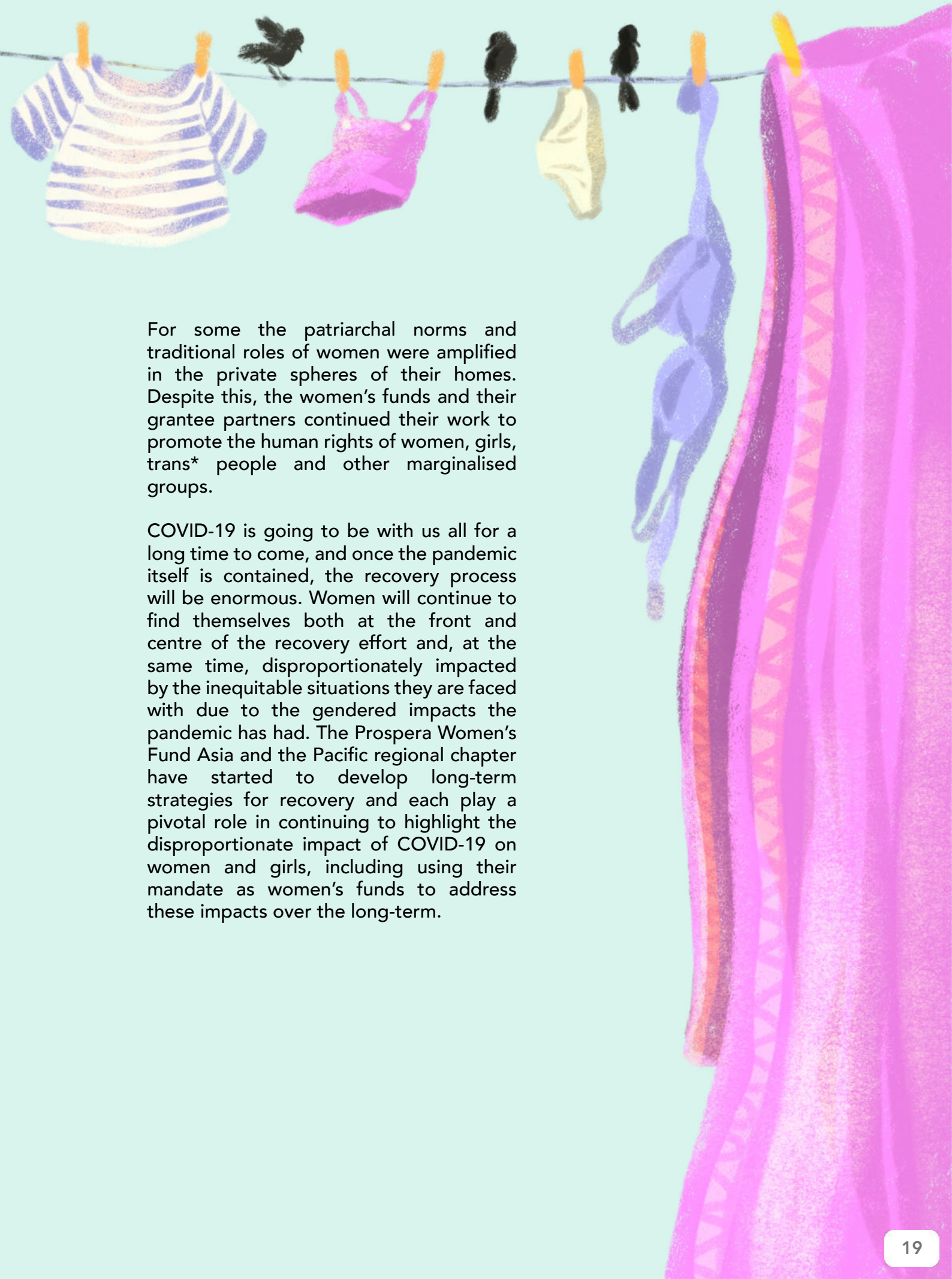
As the COVID-19 crisis impacts countries across the world, women's funds are moving quickly, adapting to a rapidly changing context to support the immediate needs of their grantees and communities. Governments in all continents are making difficult economic decisions generally without taking into account people's social and economic needs. Women's funds play a critical role to ensure that human rights, and the human rights of women, girls, trans\* people and other marginalised groups are central to responses during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to strategies for recovery. As with many organisations when operating under lock down

conditions, working from home can be challenging and women's funds had to establish its operations virtually as well as support its grantee partners to navigate the new online territory.

For the women's fund staff and grantee partners, continuing their work from home brought added challenges and generated feelings of isolation from colleagues; poor or no digital connectivity or computer hardware; added child-care and schooling responsibilities; and a lack of extended family support due to isolation measures.







For some the patriarchal norms and traditional roles of women were amplified in the private spheres of their homes. Despite this, the women's funds and their grantee partners continued their work to promote the human rights of women, girls, trans\* people and other marginalised groups.

COVID-19 is going to be with us all for a long time to come, and once the pandemic itself is contained, the recovery process will be enormous. Women will continue to find themselves both at the front and centre of the recovery effort and, at the same time, disproportionately impacted by the inequitable situations they are faced with due to the gendered impacts the pandemic has had. The Prospera Women's Fund Asia and the Pacific regional chapter have started to develop long-term strategies for recovery and each play a pivotal role in continuing to highlight the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women and girls, including using their mandate as women's funds to address these impacts over the long-term.

# COVID-19 LEARNING CIRCLE 1: GRANT MANAGEMENT

The period 2019 - 2020 presented the Prospera Asia and the Pacific regional chapter of women's funds with some of the best opportunities to fulfil their mandate of generating the means to support women, girls and trans\* people for social justice. Social unrest, multiple natural disasters followed by COVID-19 made the work of women's funds particularly critical. In addition to their mandate on advancing gender equality, the way women's funds organise and work, made them well placed to provide urgent response to the crisis, in particular to address the gender dimensions of the crisis.

Apart from continuous communication with grantee partners, the eight women's funds took different approaches to collecting information from its grantee partners and communities to strategise how to best support the immediate needs of women,

girls and trans\* people who were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Listening to their needs and priorities as well as drawing from various data sources enabled the women's funds to ensure that its response grants were able to meet grantee partner immediate needs as well as address the socioeconomic impacts on communities.

The approaches taken included:

- Learning and reflections workshops held by WFA;
- Developing a process map that allocated roles between teams for gathering information, analysis and developing concept notes for resource mobilisation by WFF;
- Tewa conducted grantee mapping to understand the status and operating





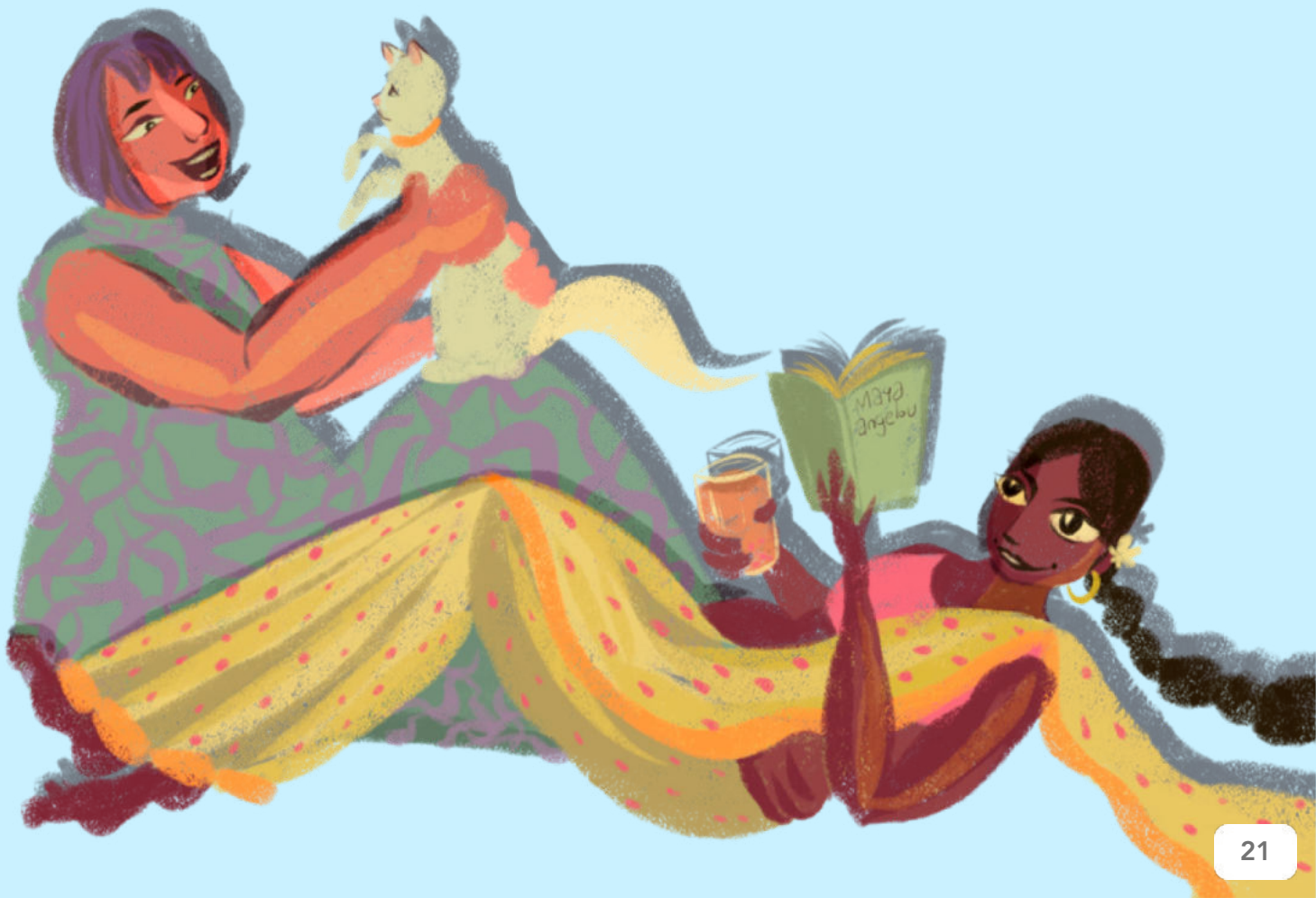
context of grantees and a rapid assessment on the situation of women labour migrant workers in the destination countries by conducting online surveys and discussions for advocacy and lobbying to government to revise foreign employment policies;

- WFA commissioned a study (unpublished) looking at Official Development Assistance and foundation-giving trends as well as drawing from initial data on COVID-19 funding from DevEx's interactive database to better understand the impact on the funding landscape in Asia;
- KFW convened online women's congress in which 158 women activists participated; and
- Virtual roundtable conversations hosted by UAF A&P, for activists across Asia and Pacific to feel connected and share their thoughts and experience

***"We listened! We knew the issues in a slightly nuanced way but with COVID-19 we had to really listen hard to the impact of COVID-19 on women and trans\* groups and engaging in that process and trying to influence, where possible, where funds had to go, not just through our own funds but other funders."***

*(women's fund learning circle workshop participant)*

This section presents the findings from the COVID-19 learning circle process on grant management and outlines the experiences of the eight women's funds in grant management during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings are presented as key themes that emerged from analysis of data and information shared during the learning circle, documentation shared by women's funds, and affirmed by the validation process. This section also includes a case study that provides examples of the multilevel, intersectional, and flexible grants provided by the women's funds during COVID-19.



# Women's funds grant management response

The eight Women's funds had to adapt and use existing approaches, and develop COVID-19 specific response grant funding mechanisms to be able to rapidly adapt and respond to the profound social and economic impact of the pandemic throughout the region. Recognising that a crisis of such magnitude required a collaborative effort and decisive response, the women's funds were among the first to mobilise.

## 1. MAKING STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENTS TO GRANT-MAKING PRACTICES AND PROVIDING FLEXIBLE GRANTS

**"Keeping grants process flexible, not interfering with what they [grantees] were doing but trying to understand and really engage."** (women's fund learning circle workshop participant)

By listening to its grantees and the women, girls and trans\* community on the ground, the women's funds were able to provide flexible and targeted grants. Knowing that in the region, government responses to COVID-19 undermined human rights and did not take into account the needs of women, girls, LGBTIQ people, migrants, informal workers and isolated rural communities, often excluding entire communities from relief and rehabilitation efforts, the women's funds were able to meet some of those immediate needs. Structural adjustments to grant making practices included:

- In the first instance, women's funds looked internally to assess and re-program budgets and resources to support the increasing need on the ground. Funds were reallocated from budget lines such as travel and program meetings to initial emergency response;
- Providing extensions to grants for existing grantee partners;
- Supporting women's groups to change their interventions focusing on COVID-19 activities of grants disbursed before the pandemic;
- Changing and/or adjusted grant facility and introduced a resilience building and movement building grant as the standard grant making mechanism took too long and did not cater for disasters or a pandemic;





- Initiating emergency funds to support grantee and community immediate needs;
- Continuing its support for movement building and support for grassroots movements;
- Removing layers of due diligence processes in the emergency grant to enable funds to get out quickly therefore working through existing grantees through a restricted grant call;
- Increasing rapid response grants and broadened grant-making criteria to create the new COVID-19 Crisis Grant to resource the resilience and survival of women and non-binary human rights defender communities in the region. For WFA, its mandate altered to cater for the magnitude of the emergency and it went from a women's fund that only provides long-term core support to its grantees to providing emergency funding. This was a key shift in WFA because information from its partners, news reports, and webinars were showing that the impact of COVID-19 in the region was too widespread an emergency to not do anything.

## 2. ADDRESSING HOW THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION INTERSECT WITH AND AMPLIFY GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

The data, information, and real-life stories that the women's funds gathered from its different data collection approaches became the basis for its targeted and intersectional grants. Women's funds supported operational costs of grantee partners while at the same time enabling grantee partners to provide direct relief supplies, support to

enable counselling services to continue as essential services, supporting women's small businesses, and targeting social protection schemes for those experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of vulnerability, such as from gender, race, age and economic status. While the grantee partners were moving to addressing immediate life-saving needs, the root causes of gender inequality were not lost and feminist principles were upheld. Women's Funds also supported interventions where activities supported economic recovery and environmental justice such as Tewa providing pesticide free agricultural support.

**"It is important to nuance and understand how this pandemic is affecting specific people and specific ways so the response has to be specific."** (women's fund learning circle workshop participant)

### KEY EXAMPLES: HOW ARE WOMEN'S FUNDS RESPONDING TO COVID-19?

The Prospera Asia and the Pacific regional chapter of women's funds are responding to the pandemic and contributing to movement building and the resilience of communities in multiple ways:

- WFF mobilised resources to provide financial assistance to support the operational costs of a key national disabled people's organisation
- KFW raised a special COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund (US\$27,488) to support 83 single-parent mothers' family and migrant women in small business who needed emergency living expenses and business running cost in Daegu-Kyungnam province where COVID-19 cases were heavily concentrated and followed by locked down in March-April 2020

- While SAWF IN did not have the funds to provide new emergency grants to its grantees, staff mobilised resources amongst themselves, provided technical advice and emotional support to its grantees
- Tewa supported an Agro -Ambulance vehicle that collected vegetables in the field and took this door-to- door to sell
- UAF A&P hosted their largest virtual consultation with 29 environmental justice defenders from 12 countries who came together to discuss challenges, responses

### 3. AWARENESS RAISING AND DISSEMINATING LIFE-SAVING INFORMATION

**“While we [women’s fund] could not provide immediate resources, we provided that emotional support, helped grantees strategise, provided information.”** (women’s fund learning circle workshop participant)

A key issue shared by the women’s funds is that there were groups of people that could not access nor understand the information about the pandemic, including how to protect themselves and others, alongside the nationwide restrictions and the impact that had on their work, families and communities. For each of the women’s funds, this was a key role that they played in ensuring that their staff and grantees had access to timely and accurate information about the pandemic. This was done through regular phone calls, online meetings and supporting radio advertisements and pamphlets for information dissemination. Lack of information and misinformation not only reduces wellbeing, it can have deadly consequences, and getting the information available in a language and format that all people can fully access and understand, was important.

In addition to information about the pandemic, the women’s funds and its grantees played a key role in taking action to advocate and prevent discrimination and address stigma and marginalisation in the wake of, and exacerbated by, the pandemic. For example, Tewa supported broadcasting awareness jingles, awareness boards, pamphlets, posters to enable communities to access information about the pandemic and targeted its distribution to slum areas. Discrimination and stigma also reduce access to mental health and psychosocial support services, negatively impacting health and wellbeing, and increasing risks, vulnerability and harm to affected persons.

### 4. FOCUS AREAS

Women’s funds have supported the following needs of its grantee partners and targeted communities:

- **Core operational costs** for grantee partners
- **Livelihood and food security:** provision of seeds, basic food items, seed funds to support business start-up
- **Health care:** provision of personal protective equipment, water tanks, sanitary and hygiene kits, blood donation programs, disinfectant toolkit, medicine including access to hormonal medicine for trans\* women and men
- **Capacity strengthening:** digital knowledge, digital security, grant management
- **Self-care and psychosocial support:** counselling services
- **Movement building:** support to grassroots women’s collectives and groups



# Key messages shared by women's funds based on their learnings and experiences in giving grants during the COVID-19 pandemic

## 1. THE PANDEMIC HAS EXACERBATED PRE-EXISTING GENDER INEQUALITIES AND THE NEEDS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS, AND ADDED NEW OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN'S FUNDS

Across the eight women's funds that participated in the learning circle workshops, each identified ways the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing needs and caused new needs to emerge. A key reflection at the learning circle workshop was that each of the women's funds took the time to engage and really listen to what is happening on the ground to be able to truly meet the needs on the ground and to be able to provide flexible grants to meet the practical and immediate needs on the ground. Despite operational challenges, existing relationships with communities, strong partnerships and flexible funding have enabled women's funds to meet these new and increased needs of women, girls and trans\* people. Collectively, the eight women's funds have supported other vulnerable groups such as daily wage workers, people with disabilities, migrant labour workers, single women and mothers, indigenous communities and orphaned children.

### EXAMPLES OF WOMEN'S FUNDS COVID-19 GRANT MECHANISMS:

<b>Women's Fund Fiji</b>	Grant amendments and extensions, Emergency Grant, Resilient Building grant, Movement Building grant
<b>HER Fund</b>	Community response grant, COVID-19 specific training to grantee partners, for example, online facilitation skill
<b>Korea Foundation for Women</b>	Grant amendments, redirecting programs, repurpose grant, emergency grant
<b>Women's Fund Asia</b>	Strengthening feminist movement grants, COVID -19 fund 'Kaagapay' for response, recovery, advocacy, capacity building; communication grants; and restricted grant calls
<b>Urgent Action Fund A&amp;P</b>	Rapid Response Grants, COVID-19 Crisis Grant

## 2. MOVEMENT BUILDING AND COLLECTIVE ACTION BUILDS RESILIENCE

The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a time where women and women's groups on the ground have been at the forefront of resilience building. Women, disability and LGBTIQ groups at the national and community level have continued to amplify their voices on the impact of the pandemic on women, girls and trans\* people as well as to advocate for access to essential services and food security. The women's funds role in supporting this work to realise the power of grassroots women, girls, and trans\* people by providing them with financial and other resources to realise their vision of social justice is empowering.

**"The collective process has been a very empowering process during the pandemic - when women collectivise and come together - it works! This is inspiring and reassures us and reinforces the work of women's funds which is focused on movement building and collective action is really what builds resilience."** (women's fund learning circle workshop participant)

## 3. LONG-TERM SUPPORT IS CRITICAL FOR EFFECTIVE COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Rapid response support for COVID-19 has occurred across the world. Women's funds agree that while they were able to support the immediate needs of women, girls, and trans:\* people, long-term

support is also needed as COVID-19 will have long-term socio, economic and environmental impacts. Pre-pandemic, organisations and groups that women's funds support were already operating on limited budgets, in particular organisations that are less likely to be registered officially in country such as grassroots women's groups or LGBTIQ people as well as those organisations with a limited ability to access external funding. For example, the Astraea Foundation reported that the median external funding of organisations serving lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in Asia and the Pacific was only US\$1,170 between 2017 and 2018, and 70% of lesbian, bisexual and queer organisations are unable to register legally, limiting their ability to access funding.<sup>13</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated funding challenges, rendering organisations dependent on project funding to be able to continue to function and meet the needs of its constituents. Most organisations do not have multi-year funding, and so they are unable to fully pivot to meet new needs. Yet despite these challenges, these same organisations find ways to continue serving and supporting women in their communities and it is these organisations, groups, and women that require long-term support.

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<sup>13</sup> Astraea Foundation (2019). Vibrant Yet Under-resourced: The State of Lesbian, Bisexual & Queer Movements. Accessed from: <https://fundlbg.org/>





#### 4. PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND WELLBEING IS IMPORTANT IN A CRISIS

Seeing the impact of COVID-19 across the world caused panic amongst staff as well as grantee partners due to the uncertainty of the pandemic and women's funds ensured that staff and grantee partners had access to counselling services. At the learning circle workshops, the participants shared feelings of uncertainty, feeling pressured into what to do and to make decisions for the safety of others, panic, fatigue, feeling overwhelmed with the magnitude of needs and not being able to support all grantee needs. Enabling grantee partners to use funding to invest in mitigating security risks and strengthen operational capacities and harm reduction, including to address burnout, will go a long way towards ensuring the communities they serve are not left behind. In the same way, the participants shared the need to look after your team, keep the team motivated and connected and that it was ok to take a break, not do anything as a way to re-charge.

The participants also shared the feeling of not being connected due to the inability to meet face to face as the usual practice for the women's funds and that there was fatigue by online platforms and wanting to connect at a human level.

**"Collective and self-care is a form of resilience - and is a priority for us and we try to ensure it is the same for the movements we work for and with. An enlightening perspective emerged from the resilience convening we [Women's Fund] held last year - from an activist in South Asia, i.e. that "self-care in the midst of the turmoil is a powerful form of resistance." (women's fund learning circle workshop participant)**

#### 5. USING THE URGENCY OF THE CRISIS TO STRATEGISE

**"Stay in the problem a bit longer and strategise what we can do as a women's fund" (women's fund learning circle workshop participant)**

A crisis is an opportunity, and as the women's funds reflected during the



learning circle workshop on the grant management process and response, there were some key reflections on what the women's funds would have done differently. Some of the learnings included:

- Increasing the capacity of the team with more staff rather than consultants
- Providing updated grant guidelines as the COVID-19 situation changed
- Strategising for longer term response
- Learning from and listening to partners, looking at gaps and access issues;
- Not allowing the emergency to overtake the women's funds processes and to spend more time in the problem in looking at what and how women's funds can uniquely address issues.

For Asia and the Pacific, the impact of COVID-19 was further exacerbated by occurrence of natural disasters and while the focus of the response was on COVID-19 and meeting immediate health risks for COVID-19, a reflection shared at the learning circle was to not **"lose focus of**

**the other issues impacting communities - health issues such as leptospirosis, dengue, typhoid. We could have influenced and talked more about where resources are going."** (women's fund learning circle workshop participant)

## **6. BROADEN FUNDING BASE TO RAISE UNRESTRICTED FUNDING**

Donor funds provided for COVID-19 response had restrictions on what the funds had to be spent on and in most grants, donors imposed time-limited restrictions as well as determining how the funds will be used such as supporting services rather than the resources that enable those services to be provided such as human resources in the form of salaries and operational cost. Women's funds identified the need to raise more unrestricted funds to use freely to respond to needs. Collectively, the women's fund representatives at the learning circle workshops agreed that there is a need to broaden the funding base of the women's funds and to raise unrestricted funding to enable the women's funds to use this funding flexibly for funding gaps in operational costs, expanding partnerships and having a pool of funds available for immediate emergency response.





## Case study: Grant Management

# Women's Funds initiate multilevel, flexible and intersectional grants for COVID-19 response

Listen, Think and Respond was the approach taken by the eight women's funds of the Prospera Asia and the Pacific regional chapter to deliver multilevel, flexible and intersectional grants that enabled grantees access to emergency hygiene assistance, sustained essential services for women and girls facing gender based violence, movement building and advocacy for putting gender on the response agenda and making women a critical part of the economic recovery.

The women's funds were well placed to act on these issues given their mandate, existing grants and sustained efforts to achieve gender equality, and women's empowerment and resilience. Existing grantees whose programs were already targeting women, girls and trans\* people easily shifted grants and operations into an emergency response. As a response, women's funds have taken several steps to support partners such as increasing contact and flexibility; this is the case for Women's Fund Asia (WFA) who immediately reached out to its partners and negotiated with its funders to provide as much flexibility as possible to existing grantee partners. Realising this was not sufficient to address the needs on the ground, WFA re-looked at its own budgets to see what resources could be

freed up for immediate response before establishing the COVID-19 Feminist Solidarity Fund to not only resource groups led by women, girls, trans\* and intersex people as they respond to and recover from the pandemic, but to help fuel the resilience of feminist movements in the region. Believing that groups themselves know best what they need and how they can best support their communities and in the spirit of journeying together with their grantees, the Feminist Solidarity Fund was called "Kaagapay" which is a Filipino term meaning to "stand by one's side or to go hand in hand in support".<sup>14</sup> Four types of grants were offered: advocacy, capacity strengthening and communications grants; response grants; recovery grants and combination (response and recovery) grants. These grant options were a move towards WFA's strategic goal of providing fully flexible funding and allowing groups themselves to decide what support they need and at the same time working towards simpler grant-making and grants management processes to be more responsive and timely including simplified reporting requirements.

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<sup>14</sup> WFA Kaagapay COVID-19 Fund Concept



Women's funds supported operational costs of grantee partners while at the same time enabling grantee partners to provide direct relief supplies, support to enable counselling services to continue as essential services, supporting women's small businesses, and targeting social protection schemes for those experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of vulnerability.

In Nepal, Tewa focused on raising awareness about COVID-19 to its partners through various platforms. Initial grants were provided to six women's organisations from five districts to play radio jingles in the local FM station, distribute masks especially to people around the slum areas who are engaged in risky jobs as well as setting up hand washing and sanitising stations around their communities. Tewa also provided immediate relief support to 300 households at Dhapakhel and supported trans\* people with hormonal medicine and financial support for hormonal replacement therapy in Nepal.

Women's funds are specifically designed to mobilise resources; facilitate strategic grants and provide capacity development support to grassroots organisations. Their support toward COVID-19 response and recovery reaffirmed their critical role in ensuring the survival and growth of grassroots women's groups and movements.





# COVID-19 LEARNING CIRCLE 2: RESOURCE MOBILISATION

***“Perspective of resources has changed completely. We [women’s funds] need to re-invent how we think and approach resource mobilisation.”***

*(Reflection from women’s fund participant during the resource mobilisation learning circle workshop)*

A key role of women’s funds is to mobilise and distribute resources to feminist and women’s rights movements. Resource mobilisation is one of the cornerstones of women’s funds in providing critical and much-needed support that is responsive to women, girls, and trans\* rights. Women’s funds are often under-resourced and work creatively and strategically with limited resources to garner support for their grantees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the existing resource challenge women’s funds face in working with limited resources to effectively address the myriad needs of their grantees. The limited resources for women’s rights and to women’s rights organisations is well documented. “Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots”, by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development, found that, in 2010, the median annual income of over 740 women’s organisations around the world was just

US\$20,000.<sup>15</sup> The 2020 scoping study *Where is the money for women and girls in the Pacific?* commissioned by the Women’s Fund Fiji and Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights Asia and the Pacific found that globally while women and girls and support for gender equality are increasingly a focus among donors, funding disbursements by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee members have declined over recent years in the Pacific with less than 1% of grant funding directed to women’s organisations in the region.<sup>16</sup>

The GiHA Working Group conducted visibility scans of response plans, analysis of funding flows and gender with age markers as well as consulted diverse WFOs’ and networks in the Asia Pacific region to determine the impact of COVID-19 on women and where the funding is being allocated. The data in this review showed persistent

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<sup>15</sup> International Network of Women’s Funds (2015) *Collective Change: The Value of Mobilizing Local Resources for Women’s Rights in the Global South and East*. Accessed from: <https://www.hrfn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/1511120454-Compilation-Collective-Change-Case-Studies-of-Ten-Womens-Funds-2015.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Fiji Women’s Fund and Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, Asia and Pacific (2020): *Where is the money for women and girls in the Pacific? Mapping funding gaps, opportunities and trends. A scoping study*. Accessed from: <https://fijiwomensfund.org/where-is-the-money/>



underfunding to initiatives for gender equality and to prevent and respond to gender based violence in humanitarian action globally, yet it is widely known funding provides many returns.

Global studies show a return of between US\$1.70 and US\$150.00 for every dollar spent on programming for women and girls, with a median value of US\$8 for every dollar spent.<sup>17</sup> The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Financial Tracking Service showed that the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 had raised a total of US\$1.74 billion in the first half of 2020, yet only US\$18,724,205 (1% of the total raised) was allocated to national or local non-governmental organisations. Out of which WFOs' received only a small portion.<sup>18</sup> To further illustrate the struggles WFOs' face in supporting the needs on the ground, the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund received 4,760 applications during its first Emergency Response window, and was only able to fund 12 of these applications. From this, 512 proposals received from the Asia Pacific region, only three projects were approved for funding due to severe funding limitations of the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund itself. The data underscores the need for increased, targeted and direct funding to support organisations to meet the needs of women and diverse groups.<sup>19</sup>

For the eight women's funds, mobilising resources in a COVID-19 heavy context meant working creatively, flexibly, and

with clear intent to ensure support reached those in most need. Women's funds used their limited resources effectively, employing multiple strategies that were grounded in deep listening and consultation with their grantees and partners. This enabled them to quickly understand what support was needed, and how to ensure this support was holistic and reached those most impacted by the pandemic. The experience of mobilising resources during the COVID-19 pandemic has affirmed what women's funds have long been advocating for- a feminist resource mobilisation agenda that is responsive to women and trans\* rights, informed by the diverse and inter-connected needs of groups, and built on meaningful engagement with funding partners. Women's funds can play an important role to bridge this funding and resource distribution agenda.

This section presents the findings from the COVID-19 learning circle process on resource mobilisation and outlines the experiences of the eight women's funds in resource mobilisation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings are presented as key themes that emerged from analysis of data and information shared during the learning circle, documentation shared by women's funds, and affirmed by the validation process. This section also includes a case study focused on what resource mobilisation means to a Women's Fund based on the experiences shared by the eight women's funds during the learning circle process.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Gender in Humanitarian Action Asia and the Pacific (2020) Closing the Funding Gap for Women-Focused Organisations Responding to COVID-19 in Asia and Pacific. Accessed from: [URL](#)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid



# Supporting a feminist resource mobilisation agenda during and beyond COVID-19

**"We [women's funds] have to be mindful and intentional with the funding we get. We negotiate with our donors. We have to listen, to trust in people. Accompanying them on the journey is important."**

*(Reflection from women's fund participant during the resource mobilisation learning circle workshop)*

Women's funds principles and capacities were tested during COVID-19, being at the nexus between the grantees and communities they serve, and their funders, women's funds were constantly reflecting, learning, and strategising to ensure support was responsive and grounded in the realities of their grantees, while managing funder requirements and restrictions. As shared by one women's fund during the learning circle workshop:

**"We talked with our donors, tried to influence where funding was going and how it was delivered, but donors had funding restrictions and we felt there were a lot of critical gaps not funded-also managing multiple grants at a time was very intense for us, we have never had grants around recovery or resilience so we had to also quickly learn the language - it was**

**a challenging time for the team."**

Despite this, women's funds actively worked to mobilise resources and influence funding agendas to ensure resourcing was informed by a rights based, gender and intersectional lens, holding true to women's funds feminist and collective principles and ways of working. For the eight Women's funds, raising resources in a COVID-19 heavy context was closely linked with raising concern and awareness about the issues affecting their grantees, in particular making more visible the issues that marginalised groups were facing and advocating for resourcing of these issues to support women and trans\* rights and communities that are most at risk and marginalised from mainstream funding:

**"Marginalised groups were excluded from information provided by government, information was inaccessible, they were excluded from aid they had a right to which led to health risks as they were not able to not go to work or stay in one place and faced increased risk."**

*(Reflection from women's fund participant during the resource mobilisation learning circle workshop)*



The diverse range of support and assistance that women's funds were able to mobilise, as highlighted in this report, is a testament to the tenacity of women's funds. While they continue to work individually and collectively to raise resources, and disburse COVID-19 emergency grants and support, they remain focused on the work ahead, in supporting resilience beyond COVID-19:

**"It is not just about raising resources anymore, it is about sustainability. We have been able to provide immediate support but long-term support is also needed as COVID-19 has long-term impacts. From the grantee mapping we have done it is evident economic issues and structural inequalities are present."** (women's fund representative during the learning circle workshop)

This reflection complements literature that highlights the vital role Women's funds play in influencing a feminist resource mobilisation or funding agenda: Women's funds play two additional vital roles: raising consciousness about the human rights violations that women and girls face, and influencing local philanthropy. As funders with roots in the social movements they support, they occupy a unique position of influence. As a result, many women's funds have explicit mandates to reshape the culture and practice of philanthropy from charitable giving to focus on root causes and systemic change.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> International Network of Women's Funds (2015) *Collective Change: The Value of Mobilizing Local Resources for Women's Rights in the Global South and East*. Accessed from: [URL](#)





# Placing people at the centre of resource mobilisation: holistic resourcing to grantee partners

*“We [women’s funds] told them [grantees] they did not have fit into what they wanted us to see but what was really needed on the ground, we wanted to support this....it is important to nuance and understand how this pandemic is affecting specific people in specific ways so the response has to be specific.”*

*(Reflection from women’s fund participant during the resource mobilisation learning circle workshop)*

A fundamental principle that guides the work of women’s funds is an intentional commitment to and focus on supporting women, trans\* groups and human rights defenders who are marginalised. During COVID-19 this guiding principle became even more relevant to how women’s funds mobilised support as the impact of the pandemic was felt more acutely by the groups women’s funds work with. These groups faced existing personal, political, and digital security vulnerabilities and COVID-19 intensified these existing vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to safety, food, and health security. The pandemic also gave rise to new crises such as economic insecurity. Women’s funds placed people, and their diverse and multifaceted needs and priorities at the centre of their resource mobilisation processes and response, ensuring resources they raised was responsive to meet both the practical and strategic needs of diverse groups.

During the learning circle discussion, women’s funds noted how their grants responded to immediate grantee needs such as food, medicine, personal protective equipment, hygiene, along with support such as rent, salaries, organisational strengthening to keep people at work and enable groups to continue service provision. Provision of psychosocial counselling to support grantee self-care and wellbeing was also another important form of support provided by women’s funds as the pandemic affected the individual and collective mental health of grantees. Women’s funds identified the need for this support from grantees that were experiencing burnout as no funding was allocated to coaching, counselling and wellbeing, in addition to donors not wanting to allocate funds to support wellbeing. Women’s funds knew that their grantees needed more than their practical or basic needs met, needing support so that their activism and wellbeing can be sustained. For example, SAWF IN prioritised emotional support to grantees **“They were exhausted being frontline responders. While we could not provide immediate resources we provided that emotional support, helped grantees strategise, provided**



**information to grantees who were groups that were marginalised from government humanitarian assistance and COVID-19 response.” (SAWF IN representative)**

For the KFW, addressing the needs of specific groups of marginalised women was a key priority. The KFW supported digital capacity development of unwed single mothers; initiated an Emergency fund to support items such as laptops, food, support for single migrant female workers and small businesses. Women’s fund Tewa mobilised resources to address food security and medical needs of groups, supporting an Agro-ambulance (vehicle that collected vegetables from the field, and sold these door-to-door) and supporting transgender men and women who were unable to access hormone therapy medicine. Women’s funds reflected how grantees were further marginalised from national government humanitarian assistance and COVID-19 response. In Fiji, WFF grantee partner Fiji Disabled Peoples Federation was left with a significant funding gap as a result of their grant from government being reduced by almost 50%. Their grant funding was diverted to support Fiji’s supplementary COVID-19 response budget. The WFF worked quickly and was able to secure a grant for the organisation who were faced with the risk of shutting down, resulting in 40 people losing employment, and affecting the disability sector as a whole.

With government responses failing to prioritise and meet the needs of people, particularly those that are marginalised, the work of women’s funds is more critical than ever. For the WFA, witnessing the impact of COVID-19 across Asia and informed by consultations with their partners, WFA adapted its grant making mandate, of providing core, long-term funding grants to include emergency response grants

for the first time ever. **“We [WFA] went from core support, long term funding to emergency funding and that happened because of our partners, seeing news reports and advocating in other donor networks. This was too widespread an emergency to not do anything” (WFA representative).** WFA was able to mobilise nearly US\$1 million in four months and provided a range of support to grantees. While WFA adapted its grant making mandate, it maintained a clear focus on supporting the most vulnerable and marginalised including ethnic and religious (minority) communities; women with disabilities, domestic, migrant and informal workers) including sex and/or entertainment workers; and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) women.

Having a deliberate and intentional focus on people and their wellbeing based on trusted and strong connections to the local communities they serve, has enabled women’s funds to provide holistic support to their grantees. Within the COVID-19 climate, it has meant much needed, and in most cases, life saving support to people that need it the most, on issues that are under-addressed or contested in COVID-19 response. The theory of change for women’s funds in mobilising holistic support is that the range of support - from material, safety and security, care and wellbeing grants, to rapid response grants all contribute to building the resilience and sustainability of grantees over time, building partnerships and influencing stakeholders such as funders, allies to appreciate people in all their diversity, and to address their needs and priorities in a more holistic and long-term manner. This approach is at the core of women’s funds resource mobilisation and grant-making, and became a more pertinent approach to take in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure support addressed the multifaceted needs of grantee partners.



# Women's funds utilise multiple strategies to mobilise resources

*"We [women's funds] started talking to groups on the ground to understand needs, the situation and where resources needed to flow.....we had to figure out how to make resources flow in an easy way. The work did not stop"*

*(Reflection from women's fund participant during the resource mobilisation learning circle workshop)*

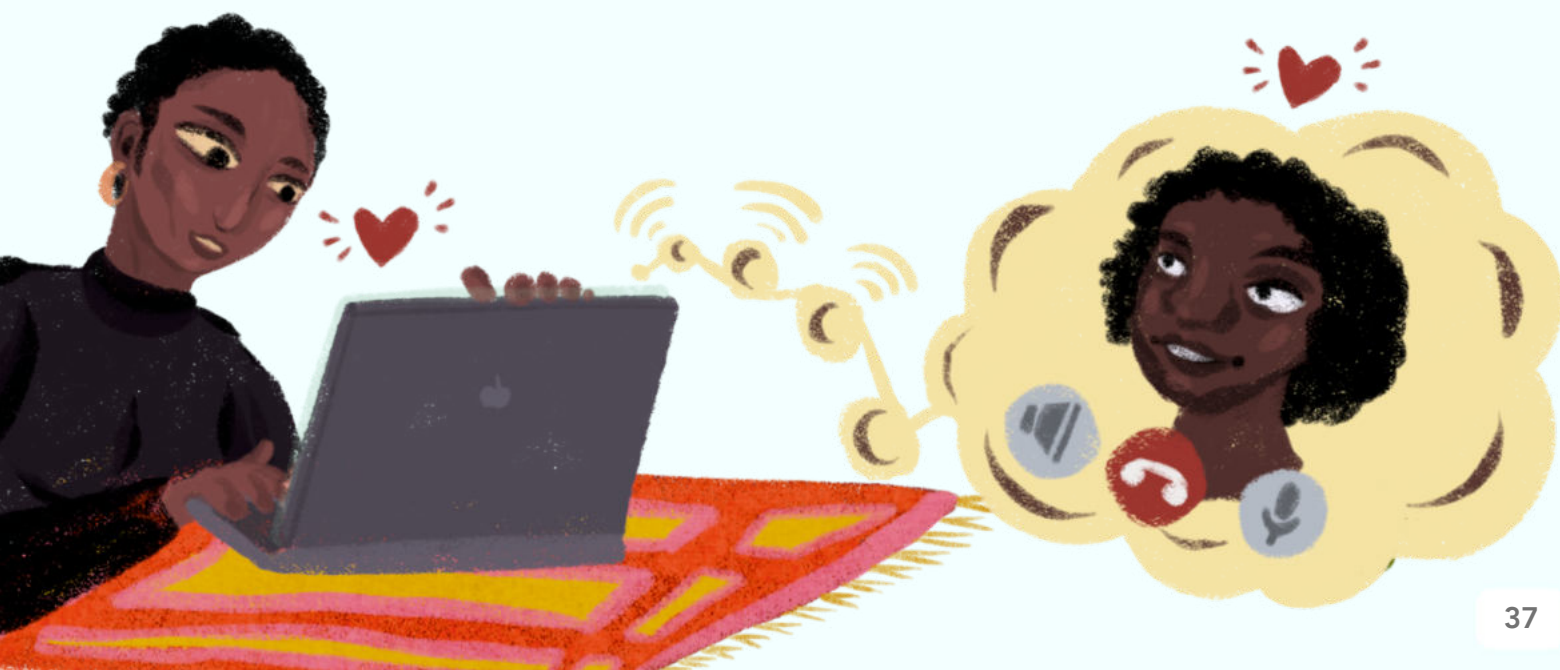
All eight women's funds reflected that the constant changes and evolving context brought about as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the unique role they play in being able to manage large grants and funding, to then deploy grants and support at the grassroots level, adapting to ensure funds go to where they are most needed. While feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of needs of their grantees and their ability to respond, women's funds asserted a sense of pride in being able to support vulnerable groups at such a critical time.

The eight women's funds raised a total additional funding of US\$2,342,483 million to respond to COVID-19. This does not include existing grants women's funds repurposed to address COVID-19 related activities identified by grantees.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, women's funds worked to quickly understand the needs and priorities of

their grantees despite being unable to connect face-to-face, by making phone calls and using online platforms to remain connected to grantees and local communities. Women's funds adapted to a rapidly changing context, taking several strategies to mobilise resources to support grantee partners. While these strategies are described in detail in the previous section on grant management, it is important to mention them in this section as there were specific and multiple strategies women's funds employed to activate support for their grantees and partners:

- **Mobilising resources from within:** Women's funds responded rapidly by first looking within their internal resourcing to reallocate and make resources available for their grantees. Women's funds adapted existing grants and worked with existing grantees to repurpose and distribute funding to be responsive to grantee need. Women's funds also had to do this while waiting for new funding or



when availability of external funds was not an option: “We looked at internal unspent resources such as travel, learning workshops budgeted for face-to face meetings that were now online and shifted these resources to support our grantees, repurposed travel grants”; “At the time there was no granter that would provide crisis support for economic recovery - so we initiated our fellowship funding for economic recovery that was eco-sensitive – COVID-19 is as much an ecological impact as it is economical” (*Reflections from women’s funds during learning circle workshops*).

- **Leveraging resources amongst women’s funds to support each other:** Women’s funds worked in solidarity to support each other, a key approach that all women’s funds espouse. For example, the Prospera network paid for Tewa’s one year Zoom subscription. This support was critical to enable Tewa to work remotely, stay connected as an organisation, and with their grantees and partners. The organisation was able to conduct training with grantee partners and volunteers who then started virtual skill sharing. Women’s funds also initiated personal fundraising to support needs on the ground. As the UAF A&P highlights: “As human rights defenders and their communities come together to support one another in this time of crisis, we continue to be hopeful. We are encouraged by the wave of people across our wide regions expressing their humanity and sharing resources with those in need.”<sup>21</sup>

- **Adapting existing grants and working with existing grantees to repurpose and reallocate funding to be responsive to grantee needs:** Women’s funds prioritised flexibility to ensure grantees received support that was timely and responsive by adapting existing grants, and grant-making processes and systems. “Initially we could not get new resources so we made amendments to existing grants to make it work in the changed context; provided extensions to grants for existing grantee partners”; “We had to remove layers of due diligence process in the emergency grants so it made sense to work through existing grantees so it was a restricted funding call” (*Reflections from women’s funds during learning circle workshops*).
- **Raising external funds:** In relatively short time-frames women’s funds raised significant resources, accessing funds from bilateral donors, other international women’s funds, local stakeholders and communities. “We were also able to source additional funds from the Australian government’s Australian Humanitarian Partnership program to support the work of eight grantee partners pivoting their work towards COVID-19 response and Tropical Cyclone Harold recovery activities. Alongside that, we were also able to

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<sup>21</sup> Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights Asia & Pacific (2020) *Lessons on risks and resilience: What we learnt as a rapid response grantmaker and feminist regional fund*







source funds from Australia's Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program to provide core organisational support to the Fiji Disabled People's Federation. We also secured funds from Global Fund for Women for COVID-19 specific activities" (WFF). HER Fund secured funding from Global Fund for Women to develop community response grants. "We then mobilised more institutional funders and individual donors to support our work so that we could hire staff, give grants, build the grantee partners' capacity, and strengthen the digital security of HER Fund" (HER Fund). With additional resourcing also came the need for women's funds to increase their internal capacity and for some women's funds this involved mobilising volunteers, hiring new support staff and training existing team members to cope with the increased workload.

- **Influencing funders:** Women's funds actively advocated and worked to influence funders to prioritise resourcing for women's rights, and marginalised groups, and to allow women's funds to repurpose existing grants in response to the changing context. Women's funds shared concept notes with bilateral donors which helped to garner new resources; negotiated with other funders to enable core costs to be covered based on experience of grantees. "We were negotiating with donors to reprogram existing funding to COVID- 19 response when asked for by partners, recognising this was a critical need for grantee partners – they were often not able to do their regular work and needed to

respond. This enabled flexibility and programming."

- **Resourcing grounded in grantee realities and evidence base:** Despite the rapidly changing context and crisis mode that women's funds were operating in, women's funds took time to conduct deep analysis, ongoing reflection and learning to ensure their responses were informed by their grantee partners and analysis of the political and funding landscape. This approach was important for women's funds as for some of them their grantee partners did not know how to respond and looked to women's funds for advice, and options on how to mobilise support within their own communities. A (unpublished) study commissioned by WFA between January and May 2020, found that Official Development Assistance towards gender equality going to and through civil society organisations in Asia and having as its fundamental objective to advance gender equality has constantly decreased since 2014. "We also documented and shared practices of collective safety and care by women human rights defenders during this pandemic. We used the feedback from focused outreach to inform and guide us" (UAF A&P); "Keeping an ear to the ground always and going together with our grantees on the journey was important for us" (*Reflections from women's funds during learning circle workshops*). For the WFF, their response to COVID-19 in the Pacific was based on key interlinked strategic priorities: addressing GBV; economic security; and gender inclusive responses.

# Case Study: Resource Mobilisation

## What does resource mobilisation mean for a Women's Fund?

**"There are a lot of things that go into mobilising resources that you cannot put a dollar value to- the networks that is leveraged, strategic thinking and this is important to understand in the work of a women's fund, the resources that are mobilised outside of money is equally important"** *(Reflection from women's fund representative during the learning circle workshop)*

The experiences of women's funds in raising support and undertaking resource mobilisation during COVID-19 prompted women's funds to reflect on what encompasses resource mobilisation for a women's fund. For women's funds, resource mobilisation is a process of raising financial and non-financial support, guided by feminist principles, and informed by the needs and priorities of the diverse grantees, partners, and communities that women's funds support. Resource mobilisation is more than just financial transactions or money but includes knowledge, connections, networks, volunteers, care, teamwork and collaboration. Women's funds also acknowledge that while all eight funds experienced challenges associated with garnering resources that are responsive to the diverse grantees they work with, the funding landscape differs across the countries, and at the Asia and Pacific regional levels. Each context is different, some women's funds were able to mobilise resources domestically through

local fundraising (Tewa, KFW); some were successful in securing funding from bilateral donors and other international Women's networks (WFF, UAF A&P, WFA, HER Fund, Tewa), while some were not able to access financial resources immediately but knew the needs on the ground, and provided other forms of support (emotional, wellbeing, information and linking to other networks and resources) (SAWF IN). Each fund operates in a distinct context, and the women's funds themselves have varying levels of experience in resource mobilisation. This context shapes and informs the resource mobilisation strategies they employ to raise support.

To further illustrate the resource mobilisation process, the following lists the different types of support and strategies women's funds used to mobilise resources during COVID-19:

- Submitting proposals to funders for emergency grants
- Looking internally to reallocate existing grants and funds to support immediate needs of grantees
- Organising fundraising events
- Mobilising support from the private sector (for the provision of face masks to vulnerable communities)
- Giving and bartering (individually and collectively as women's funds in sharing resources amongst each other, and supporting community



initiatives). The culture of giving and bartering that emerged and strengthened during the pandemic, and opportunities for cross region learning on giving for women's, girls, trans\* rights

- Mobilising volunteer support who provide their time and resources to support the work of women's funds
- Providing emotional support, psychosocial support and counselling to grantees
- Capacity development and organisational strengthening support
- Linking grantees to other networks/ women's groups/donors

The women's funds found that their resource mobilisation work has helped them progress other strategic objectives:

- Raising awareness and advocating for the rights of diverse women, trans\* and other marginalised groups
- Influencing donors to provide core support, to help shift funding from project, activity based funding to investing in core costs and grantee capacity development. Women's funds noted the overwhelming need for operational costs (rent, and

salaries). An emerging need from grantees is health insurance—something often considered a luxury for not-for-profit workers but in the COVID-19 climate has become essential to ensure proper care and wellbeing of workers

- Supporting collective action and constituency building among women's groups to advance women's rights;
- Raising the profile of the women's fund and their grantees; and
- Facilitating access of women's groups and marginalised groups that miss out on mainstream funding to funding and support, and helping to increase the resilience and sustainability of movements

Women's funds utilised resource mobilisation as a tool to help shift access to resources for groups that were left out of humanitarian assistance and COVID-19 response. For example: KFW advocated for support to be given at an individual base and not household base as single migrant women are excluded from national support because they are not regarded as a household and WFA grantee partners formulated their own strategy with support from WFA who were then able to communicate grantee needs to donors.

The following reflections from women's funds, including a grantee partner, confirm the dynamic way women's funds worked to mobilise resources and support for their grantees and partners during COVID-19.



# Supporting effective and transformative grant management and resource mobilisation beyond COVID-19: recommendations from Women's Funds

The learnings from the eight women's funds featured in this report underscore the power that women's funds have in moving resources and support to those that have been most marginalised and disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Women's funds play a critical role in transforming resources that would otherwise be inaccessible for smaller women's and feminist groups, and while these resources represent a significantly less amount of money in the overall funding architecture, as demonstrated in this report, the value and importance of women's funds and feminist organising must not be underestimated or understated.

The COVID-19 pandemic magnifies what women's funds and the feminist movement have long known and advocated for - *the inequalities and disparities that exist in our communities, systems, in particular the unequal distribution of power, decision making and resources*. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, money and resources continue to shift-who has it and who does not have it has shifted. Inequalities are deepening and with it creating an urgency for change. The virus did not cause the inequality; it existed before and is deepening in this moment. But the virus is shining a light on disparities and creating urgency for change.

This report attempts to highlight how women's funds through their dynamic grant management and astute resource mobilisation during COVID-19 have supported local constituencies to advance the rights of women and trans\* groups. Grants and resource mobilisation are powerful and important mechanisms women's funds use to help shift and influence changes in beliefs and attitudes, social and cultural norms, and formal systems, structures, and processes, including access to resources. Women's funds utilised these before COVID-19, in response to COVID-19, and will continue beyond COVID-19 as they journey with their grantees, communities, and partners to address the long-term impacts of COVID-19.

Below are two sets of key messages and recommendations from the eight women's funds. The first is focused on key messages from women's funds themselves as part of their own self-reflection toward learning and growth. Women's funds were, and continue to be challenged with working in an ever changing context, leveraging the opportunities the pandemic presents to be more intentional and strategic with their grantmaking and resource mobilisation mandates, and to continue to grow and learn from each other as women's funds. The second set of key messages and recommendations is for funders who want to support diverse women, trans\* groups, and marginalised population groups affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. As highlighted by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (2019), "Funders are much more than the money they distribute; they play powerful roles in shaping the [funding] ecosystem as a whole".<sup>22</sup> Funders can therefore play a key role in shifting and shaping the funding landscape to be more inclusive and transformative.

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<sup>22</sup> Association for Women's Rights in Development (2019) Toward a feminist funding ecosystem. Accessed from: [URL](#)

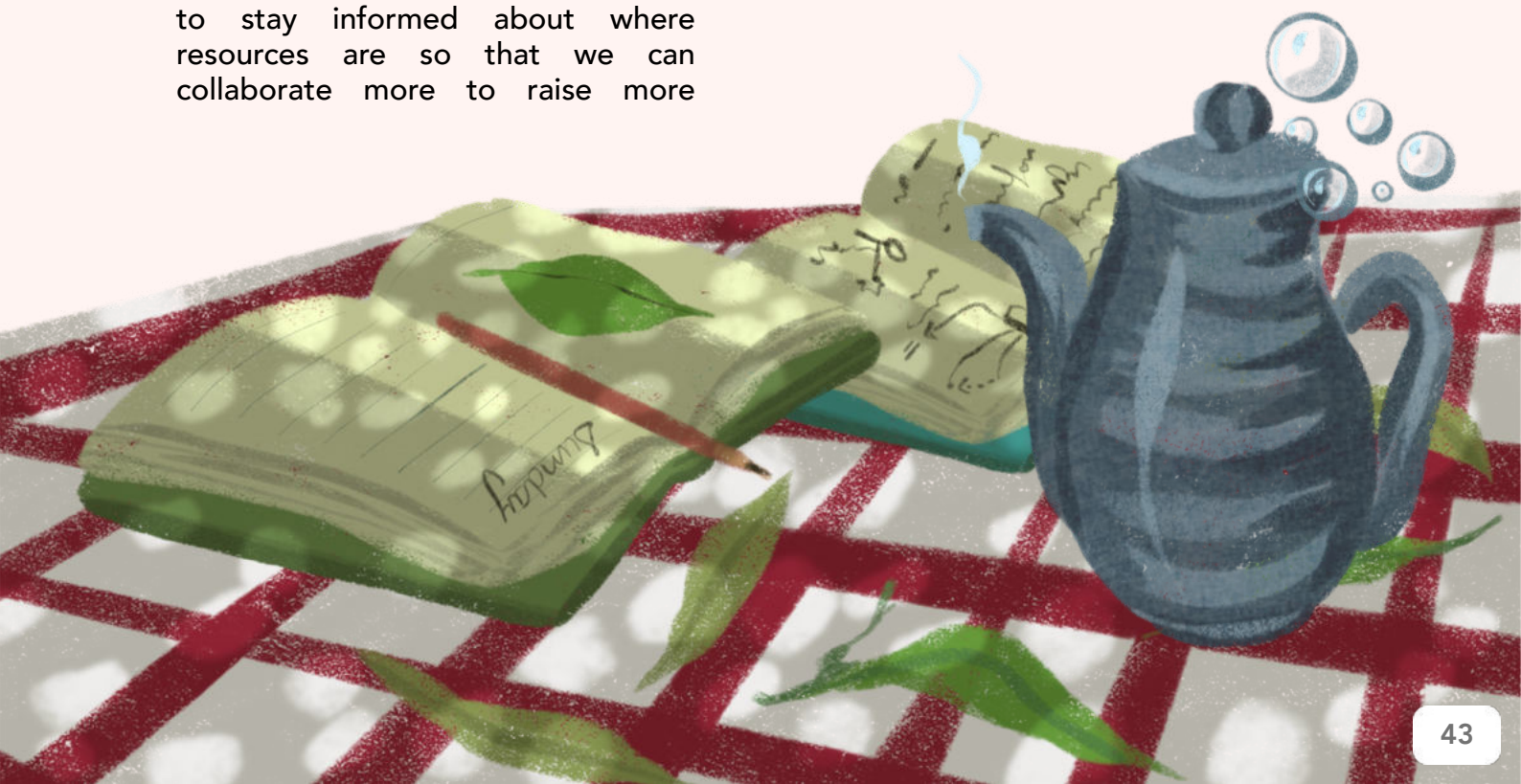



# What we can do as women's funds

- **Continue to prioritise collective and self-care:** Collective and self-care is a form of resilience and amid turmoil is a powerful form of resistance. The core of women's funds is the team- you have to look after your team, encourage the team to take a break and a pause. For women's funds leaders- you cannot do everything yourself, look after yourself and your team so they stay motivated and connected- work harder but smarter!
- **We need each other and must continue to build a stronger solidarity network, including re-thinking how we connect and stay in touch:** Women's funds are connecting digitally out of necessity and will continue this to stay connected, to continue movement building and organising. In the COVID-19 era with physical distancing and travel restrictions a continued reality, communication and relationships are so important to help address the crisis we are facing. Conversations to build solidarity need to be reinvigorated. We need to stay in touch as sisters in the (Asia-Pacific) region to share information, learning, to stay informed about where resources are so that we can collaborate more to raise more

resources from diverse donors. We need to remain ready to do our convening and solidarity differently and creatively because the context is changing so quickly.

- **Stay in the problem a bit longer - analyse, reflect, listen deeply to partners, and then develop our strategies as a women's fund:** Listening to our grantees, our partners, has served us well in building trust and credibility over time, helping to create powerful alliances and a united voice on issues. Reflecting on our COVID-19 response, we at times did not spend enough time to reflect and analyse our context, our internal capacities were also stretched and we had to quickly learn new areas of granting (humanitarian assistance, emergency response, and disaster risk response). We need to continue to document our experiences and learnings as women's funds, and create safe, engaging spaces for conversations with our grantees, communities, and partners so that we remain responsive to their needs. This





approach is also important to help ensure the sustainability and vibrancy of our movement over the long-term.

- **Do not lose focus of the other issues impacting our communities:** As women's funds we know that other issues such as violence against women, health issues, and access to justice existed before COVID-19 and have been exacerbated during the pandemic. We must not lose sight of these issues and must continue to take an intentional, long-term view of the problem so that we can effectively influence and talk about where resources are going and need to go. As reflected during our learning circle workshops: **"We must not jump into the urgency of the emergency and not jump directly into assistance but really strategise and look beyond and learn and listen to our partners and not allowing the emergency to overtake our processes"**.
- **Negotiate with our donors differently:** Funders had restrictions on funding, leaving critical gaps, particularly around the need for core support and funding that meets our needs as women's funds, and the needs of women's groups and collectives. Due to funding restrictions, we overtly worked with our past and current grantees. We need to broaden our funding base. As feminist funds individually or collectively we will continue to advocate for funding that truly meets our needs and collaborate and negotiate with our funders for more harmonised and transformative funding approaches.





# Recommendations for funders

- **Support grassroots women, trans\* and marginalised groups through unrestricted funding:** The impact of COVID-19 is global, its effects are widespread and no country or community, regardless of social, economic or political status has been exempted by the pandemic. However, the pandemic has had disproportionate impact on women (in all their diversities) and marginalised groups. It is important for funders to know this and to know how support through a women's fund facilitates the much needed, and in most cases life-saving support to these groups. This also enables support to the cross-movements that women's funds work with such as communities facing marginalisation and oppression, including female migrant workers, LGBTIQ, sex workers, women with disabilities, and indigenous people. Funders need to require less information from grantees and not burden groups with high administrative and reporting requirements. Women's funds acknowledge that some funders are taking a more flexible and less restrictive approach to funding, but there is a need for more funders to embrace these funding models. Unrestricted funding

enables women's funds to respond rapidly and flexibly, and enable organisations to decide where resources need to be spent which is often on the issues that are under-dressed or overlooked, and marginalised groups.<sup>23</sup> This is even more pertinent in a COVID-19 climate where groups and organisations are adapting to a constantly changing context.

- **Allocate resources for grantee capacity development and institutional strengthening of women's funds:** Connected to unrestricted funding is the need for funding that supports the growth, development, and sustainability of women's funds and their grantees. Women's funds have long demonstrated their unique role in working with limited resources yet utilising these resources to move their missions forward. Unrestricted funding targeted at developing both grantee and women's funds organisational and programming capacity enables more flexible responses, strengthens local organisations, resulting in more vibrant organisations and more effective programming being delivered.

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<sup>23</sup> Mama Cash- Investing well in the right places: why fund women's funds. 2015. Accessed from: [URL](#)



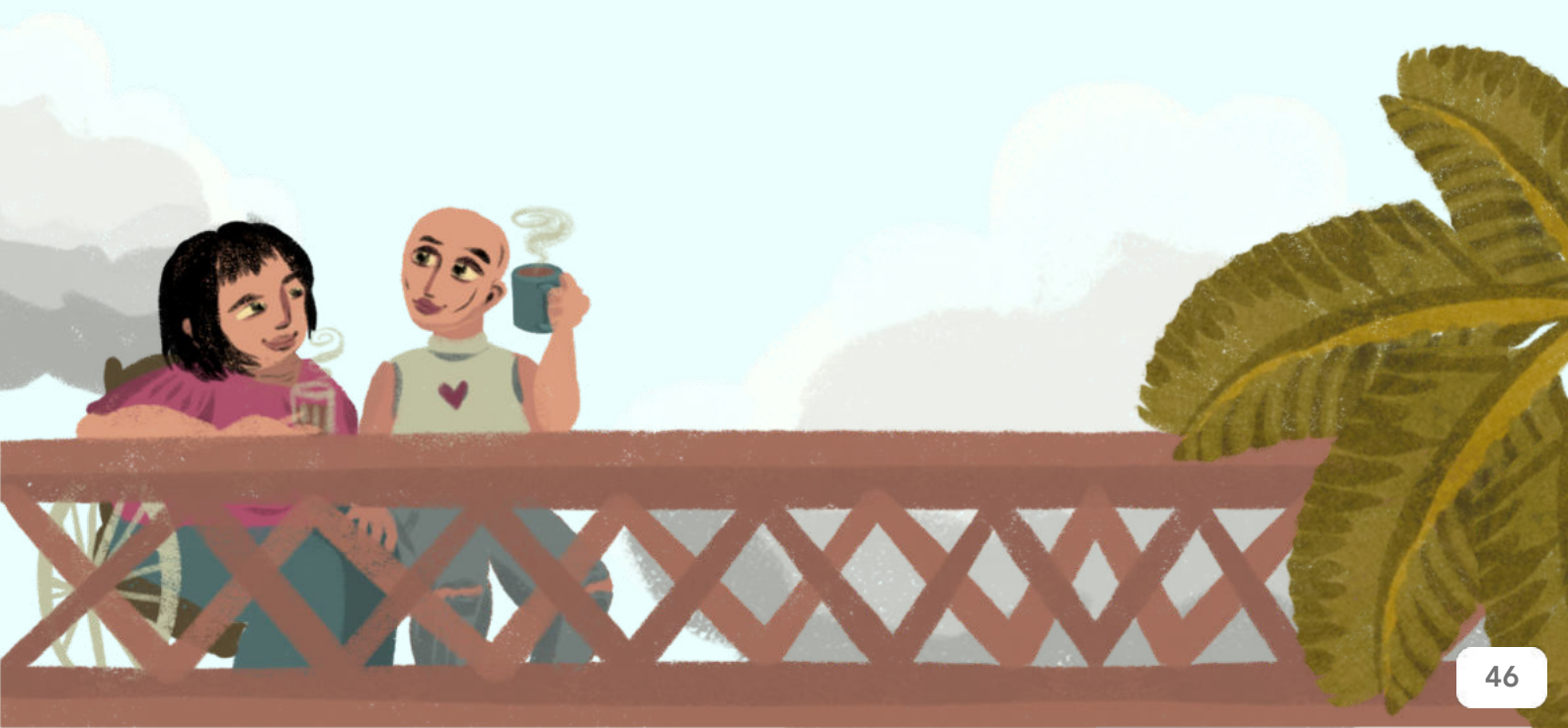
- **Continue to support women's funds beyond COVID-19:** The impacts of the pandemic are long-term. During the learning circle workshop discussions, women's funds shared how they were already thinking about or had commenced planning post COVID-19 strategies to continue supporting their grantees and partners toward building resilient communities. This long-term approach is critical given the pandemic threatens to undermine positive gender equality gains fostered over decades by feminist movements. Core, flexible, long-term funding support directly for feminist groups is even more critical than before, particularly in contexts where human rights, good governance and democracy are under threat. With limited appropriate resourcing (financial and non-financial), women's funds will continue to be challenged with responding to immediate emergency and humanitarian support and the long-term support aimed at systemic and structural changes. As reflected by a women's fund representative during the workshop, "It is so important for funders to continue to invest in women's rights work, during this time and beyond COVID-19". Existing literature also highlights the value of investing in women's funds: "Women's funds are the drivers of collective action.....more funding to women's rights groups, organisations and movements is needed

but donors cannot always reach those doing critical work. Women's funds are the mechanism to do so and work with a view to the long-term goal of securing rights for all women, girls and trans\* groups."<sup>24</sup>

- **Adopt a more rights based approach to funding:** The eight women's funds strongly assert that all resource mobilisation should employ a rights based approach, an approach that is also shared by funders. Women's funds require a flexible approach by funders in the types of groups they fund- as feminist and rights based groups, women's funds are asked to respond to the needs of diverse groups while funders expect women's funds to only work with a certain group(s) and only on certain issues. This is not the reality of women's funds programing who work with diverse groups and communities. A more human rights and intersectional approach is needed. As expressed by a women's fund representative during the learning circle workshop "**There is a need for a more human rights approach- there are other issues besides COVID-19 (suicide, health, violence) and work to address these continues**".

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid





- **Continue to have funding dedicated specifically for humanitarian and emergency assistance (including COVID-19 response, natural disasters or any kind of crisis), but balance this with a continued focus on funding for gender equality and women’s rights:** As reflected by the WFF in their publication *A global pandemic and a tropical cyclone – How the Women’s Fund Fiji’s grantees are on the frontlines of recovery efforts* there is concern that “with some grantee partners shifting their focus and funding to COVID-19 response and Tropical Cyclone Harold recovery, there is a risk that programs focused on key national gender-equality issues may lose momentum, pushed to the back burner, or run out of monetary support before they can be completed”.<sup>25</sup> Some regard COVID-19 as the biggest setback to gender equality in a decade - the burden of unpaid work on women has significantly increased; the sharp rise in gender based violence as a result of lockdowns and movement restrictions; and massive loss of livelihoods with women worse off as they are likely to be in informal, low-paid jobs.<sup>26</sup> The need for funders to invest in long-term, flexible funding to groups like women’s funds that espouse feminist and social justice principles and values is now needed more than ever before. This funding will help groups develop their own solutions, work on issues in an intersectional way to ensure resources reach those in most need, and importantly continue to transform the lives of women, girls, trans\* and marginalised groups.

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<sup>25</sup> Fiji Women’s Fund (2020) *A global pandemic and a tropical cyclone – How the Fiji Women’s Fund’s grantees are on the frontlines of recovery efforts*

<sup>26</sup> World Economic Forum (2021) *COVID-19 is the biggest setback to gender equality in a decade*. Accessed from: [URL](#)





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