

FALL 2023 ISSUE

DON'T JUST REPRESENT. ENSURE OUR PARTNERS HAVE A SEAT AT THE TABLE.

CELEBRATING COLLECTIVE POWER!

A SUMMER OF CONNECTING AND CONVENING FOR CHANGE



STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH COMMUNITY VISITS

Over two weeks in July 2023, our Programs Team visited 12 partner organizations in Kenya and Tanzania. The stories of leadership and resilience that emerged through conversations with women, girls, and trans people across rural and urban areas served as a reminder that lasting change is possible when we invest in community-led solutions.

From Arise and Shine's income generation initiative to Rebirth of a Queen's collaborations with local leaders, our grantee partners' innovative and context-responsive work re-ignited Women First's dedication to empowering communities at the heart of grassroots action for gender equality and economic justice.

REFLECTION FROM THE ED

Emily Forhman

This has been a summer full of transformation, learning, and building collective resilience. I had a life-changing opportunity to travel to Rwanda and Kenya where I attended the Women Deliver conference followed by a convening of our grantee partners. I left inspired to engage with the very political landscape that impacts our grantee partners' access to resources and decision-making power.

I learned that we partner with truly small and emerging organizations working relentlessly to support their communities in incredibly challenging contexts. Some of our partners only have 1-2 paid staff members with a majority of their members working as volunteers. I learned what it really means to create context-specific solutions; what it means to work on increasing financial literacy of women who cannot write, or getting women to attend a savings and loan course who due to their caste are not allowed to get a seat on the bus. I learned that most of these women leaders do not have the privilege to prioritize self-care.

I learned that women who experience multiple forms of oppression are also the most fierce and formidable, and nothing will stop them from moving forward.

In Rwanda and Kenya, I witnessed the significance of knowledge-sharing and building solidarity beyond borders. The wisdom that women and trans communities can bring to the table often remains overlooked, but most integral to the process of creating a gender equal world.

I'm proud of the Women First community for their dedicated efforts to center the expertise and resilience of our grantee partners. I look forward to continue investing in spaces where friendships flourish and transformative change is ignited.



WOMEN FIRST AT WOMEN DELIVER

Women First attended the Women Deliver conference in Kigali, Rwanda, and sponsored the participation of our grantee partners Nafisika Trust from Kenya, and Rural Women Development Trust from India.

“Attending the Women Deliver Conference was an incredible opportunity, but I have to admit, there was a moment of hesitation,” Rose reflects. “After a thought-provoking panel discussion, I wanted to speak with a feminist leader whom I admired, but she was surrounded by a circle of about 10 people. I wanted to walk up to her and introduce myself, to share my experiences and learn from hers, but the fear of intruding into that inner circle held me back. It reminded me of how power dynamics can be deeply ingrained, even in spaces that champion equality and inclusion.” “But then I realized,” Rose continues, “that I wasn’t alone in this journey. I had my Women First community right there with me in Kigali, and I was representing my community back home. I was representing all the formerly incarcerated women in Kenya who can’t be at this conference, but need their struggles to be understood and supported by the wider community of gender justice advocates. That realization gave me the courage to challenge these barriers, to challenge the very power dynamics that have historically dictated who can approach whom. So I walked up to the leader, and even managed to exchange contact information and continue our conversation on LinkedIn! I’m so glad I did this, because now I know that I was at Women Deliver not just to be present, but to be heard.”

PARTNERS CONNECT: WOMEN FIRST HOSTS A CONVENING IN KENYA

After the Women Deliver conference, Women First hosted a convening in Kenya, bringing together our long-term grantee partners to collaborate on strategies for building resilient grassroots organizations that have the resources, narrative power, and social capital needed to create a gender equal world.

Alamelu, a former bonded laborer from Tamil Nadu, India, who is leading Rural Women’s Development Trust’s fight against bonded labor and caste-based oppression, highlighted that this experience was much more than an opportunity to learn new skills. “No woman from my community is ever allowed to go anywhere. However, I took a flight, and I traveled abroad for the first time – that too, on my own! So many people outside India still don’t know or understand the caste system. They don’t understand the struggles of the women in my community...Today, I have feminist friends, activist friends, in Kenya! And this gives me so much hope to know that my friends there know about the caste system, and are eager to stand by me in raising awareness about bonded labor and its unjust impact on women from oppressed caste communities in India.”

Alamelu, Rose, and a few other Women First grantee partners discovered solidarity in action that extended beyond the convening, through a WhatsApp group that was organically formed after they spent time together. Today, our grantees stay connected as they chat about their everyday lives, acknowledge their shared struggles, value diverse forms of expertise, and support each other in big and small ways – whether it is to help each other draft proposals, or to further explain complex socio-political challenges that their communities are grappling with. In Alamelu’s words, “This connection wouldn’t be so strong if we had only met online. Today, they have seen me, heard my voice, they know who I am, they know what my Dalit identity means to me. Through being with me in-person, they connected with my struggle in a different way. And I learned about who they are and what their work means to them in the same way, by first connecting with them as people. This connection inspires us to learn more and speak up louder for each other.”

**THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE CHANGE DOESN'T END HERE.
IT CONTINUES WITH YOU!**

By investing in the power of connecting and convening, you can help women and trans people co-create solutions, and amplify the collective call for a gender equal world.

