



“Women entrepreneurs do not give up; they are resilient, diverse, and innovative.”

- Hadijah Nankanja,
from Women First's partner
Community Women's Enterprise
Network (CWEN), Uganda

A year has passed since COVID-19 took hold, but as spring arrives in the US, the determination of our grantee partners continues to inspire us.

The need for support continues, despite progress. In Uganda, 61% of women-led small businesses failed to generate income even as lockdown measures were eased.

Business Insider, 2021

CWEN is a hub for women entrepreneurs in Kampala, Uganda, and for their small enterprise partners. COVID-19 was catastrophic. Estimates suggest that during the first month of the pandemic, **informal workers globally lost an average of 60% of their income**. In Uganda, prices of raw materials and packaging doubled or tripled nearly overnight. This impact was compounded by challenges women already face in accessing finance, markets, information, and digital technology.

As a community-based organization, CWEN had a perfect vantage from which to spot opportunity – and they did. Because of lockdowns, families had to rely on products available locally in their communities, creating a space in the market for products women entrepreneurs were already making. With an emergency grant from Women First, CWEN supported ten women to stay in business, distributing capital to purchase the raw materials and packaging needed to produce local food baskets and the marketing tools to improve their sales. This is how women thrive – by working together.

We invite you to learn more about CWEN and the women entrepreneurs they are empowering by visiting our blog, available on our website: www.womenfirstfund.org.

UNITED NATIONS CSW65

Women First attended the 65th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) from March 15-26, 2021. The virtual format enabled us to include a delegation that truly represents our organization – one made up of community-based grantee partners from East Africa and India, as well as staff, board, and committee members. Val from grantee partner MAD Sisters shared this inspiring note about her experience: "The CSW65 sessions were such an eye-opener for me and the lessons I learned will be shared with my team at MAD Sisters. I was challenged to be a bold feminist even as the globe fights COVID-19. We should take it upon ourselves to go back to better and not to normalcy. I also learnt that the representation of women that we fight for will be possible if we stand up and take the spaces ourselves, that **no decision should be made about us without us!**"

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

2020 was a rollercoaster year that brought so many changes and lessons. Perhaps first and foremost, we learned that the world can change overnight and that having a nimble and resilient platform has immense benefits during challenging times. Entering 2021, we are still navigating changes to the global landscape but we feel confident and well-positioned due to our hard work over the past four years. We have a strong volunteer board and staff leadership that can act decisively and strategically; more reliance on subject matter experts who provide us with strategic information when we're making decisions; and the ability to rely on cross-functional committees so that every part of our organization is in alignment in support of programs, initiatives and our mission to drive the economic empowerment of women, girls and trans people.

Engaging with partners, we realize we have created a unique space in the field of funding women's economic empowerment and that our model of flexible grants and capacity building has enormous impact. As our grantee partners pivoted to address the needs of their local communities, many were forced to change their business plans temporarily. Acting as true partners, we were able to shift with them without jeopardizing the funds dedicated to their program development. Connection to Women First offered a unique lifeline and while many organizations had to shut their doors due to COVID-19, we are proud to say that our grantee partners will weather this storm. Like the women that you read about in this newsletter, Women First does not give up. We are resilient, unique, and innovative and remain so thankful to our loyal donors. Without you, none of this would be possible.

BOARD MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: DR. ESTHER NGUMBI

Dr. Esther Ngumbi joined our Board in 2018, and is an active member of the Grants and Learning and Governance and Board Development Committees. Esther is an Assistant Professor in the Entomology and African American Departments at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She is also the 2021 recipient of the prestigious 2021 Mani L. Bhaumik Award for Public Engagement with Science from the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Esther is originally from Kenya's coastal Kwale County. She grew up in a rural community where she learned the importance of hard work, by collecting water and firewood and helping on her family's farm. Through this she gained an appreciation for the little things in life... things money cannot buy.



Her parents emphasized the importance of education as a way out of poverty and sacrificed their family funds on Esther and her siblings' educations. At an early age, Esther was inspired to pursue a career in science and entomology after realizing that each season, there was crisis, usually an insect, damaging the crops. Esther wanted to understand this better and began her interest in entomology.

Esther is thankful for the many mentors she had that tapped into her curiosity, intelligence, and drive and pushed her to find solutions to issues that affected rural families like hers. She received a scholarship to study for her PhD at Auburn University, in Alabama. Her research and scientific pursuits at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign have been internationally recognized and awarded.

Esther is proud to be a Women First Board member because, "we give women power by investing in them and opening up a world of opportunity that would otherwise be unattainable". Esther is especially proud of Women First's new six-year partnership model, which shows our understanding that change doesn't happen overnight and that we are committed to our grantee partners' long-term success. Esther's passion for women and girls traces back to her childhood in Kenya. Esther saw women like her mother not receiving the appreciation they earned and deserved. She knew that if all women were given equal resources and opportunities – they could accomplish anything.

We thank Esther for her passion and dedication – she is an inspiration to all of us at Women First!

Women First grantee partners live and work in some of the most difficult environments on earth — communities where COVID-19 is only one of many life-threatening issues. And yet, less than 2% of donor funding reaches the grassroots groups we partner with, despite evidence showing that the mobilization of these groups has a more direct influence on positive change to society than almost any other factor.

Learn more about how you can help Women First continue to support our grantee partners and the women, girls, and trans people they serve:

www.womenfirstfund.org/donate

All donations are fully tax-deductible by United States Federal Law. EIN: 23-7068080.