

spring

newsletter

2023

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**spring  
forward**  
with Women First!



# Our Journey...

1969

Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund (VGIF) incorporated. Founded by a group of women from the International Federation of University Women to support international women's higher education.

1991

First Staff hired. Our organization's focus shifts to funding women-led grassroots organizations and begins funding 8 grants per year.

2019-present

VGIF rebrands to Women First International Fund, expands grantee pool to reach trans community leaders, and adopts an innovative **long-term funding model, offering flexible grants and capacity-strengthening** support for a 6 year period



A message from the  
**Executive Director,**  
**Emily Forhman.**



As we enter the season of growth and renewal, Women First is ready to bloom with our new team, dynamic board, and exciting partnerships! We recently celebrated International Women's Day by hosting a side-event during the United Nations' Commission on Status of Women, where we learned from our partners in Kenya, Tanzania, and India about **community-based solutions** that bridge the gender digital divide. Over the past year, Women First engaged in reflection, connection, and learning through **5 regional convenings, 3 peer learning exchanges, 19 partner visits, and** increased collaboration with peer funders. Through this, we've gained a deeper understanding of our grantmaking program, which offers up to 6 years of funding and capacity-strengthening for organizations advancing economic empowerment for women, girls, and trans people globally. As we mobilize and **shift resources to build a world that works for everyone**, we look forward to continuing to closely partner with grassroots leaders and incredible supporters like you. **Thank you for being a part of our journey!**

# Meet the Development Team



**Bria Holmes-Lewis**  
Marketing and  
Communications Manager

## Why Women First?

I grew up surrounded by powerful women who led by example and instilled in me the importance of advocating for women and girls' rights. Joining Women First as a communicator and creative allows me to translate my passion for storytelling into advocacy and community-building, leaning into our close relationships with grantee partners for global change.

In the world of social impact, transformative change is too often thought of as something that needs to happen 'outside' of our immediate contexts. Women First embraces a rare commitment to looking inward, and a genuine desire to evolve for value-aligned action. It's an honor to build bold partnerships alongside a brave, self-aware, and empathetic team that believes in walking the talk for long-term change, and supports community-led solutions in big and small ways.

Working at Women First is an amazing opportunity to be part of an important shift in philanthropy towards long-term and flexible support, building sustainable organizations that drive economic empowerment for women, trans people, and their communities. We prioritize building long-term partnerships based on community power and knowledge, rather than short-term and top-down relationships. It's a privilege to contribute to sustaining Women First's capacity to resource grantee partners who lead the way to a just and equitable future.

## What brings you joy?

I have been remarkably blessed to find communities throughout my lifetime which nourish my wellbeing, fill me with a sense of belonging and prompt me to evolve. Because of those experiences, I find the most joy in returning to those communities and playing an active role in creating spaces like them, so that others can partake in such fulfillment!

For me, joy is about the feeling of connection that makes me instantly know that I'm experiencing a moment worth remembering. I find joy in the process of seeking joy, because it helps me live into my values and purpose, all while feeling connected to the strong support systems that make me who I am. I love building connections through song, dance, long walks, beach sunsets, traveling to new places, and enjoying good coffee and great food with candid conversations!

The simple things in life bring me joy: a morning coffee before a long day of zoom calls, connecting with loved ones and meeting new people, enjoying Mexico City's always lovely weather. These little moments remind me of how much I have to be grateful for, and help me find happiness in the present. I'm energized by the inspiring conversations that I have with my incredible team as we think about how we can show up in meaningful ways for our grantee partners and their communities.



**Sneha Tatapudy**  
Manager of Institutional  
Partnerships and Strategic  
Alliances



**Ana Pecova**  
Director of Advancement

\*Kelsey Ottoson transitioned to a part-time role but remains a valuable and integral part of our team!

## Women First at CSW 67!

On March 15, 2023, we hosted an event co-facilitated by our UN representative Anita Thomas, where nearly **70 people** joined Women First virtually to learn from our grantee partners about **community-led solutions to advance access to innovation, technology, and financial inclusion** for gender equality. The message from our partners was loud and clear, **"Nothing about us without us."**



# In Conversation With...

## Women of Influence (WOI)

Women of Influence (WOI), a partner organization in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, was formed by a group of lawyers who support women from disadvantaged backgrounds to cultivate business skills. Together, they work on closing the gender economic gap by breaking barriers, enhancing their impact, and bringing purpose to their work.

### Who do you work with?

Our community is made up of small scale entrepreneurs, many of whom are women aged 18-50 with no knowledge on how to expand their businesses. This is due to lack of awareness on different aspects of business management, including the fear of formalizing their business which can potentially give them access to bigger markets, loans and tenders.

### How do you drive change?

In collaboration with the local government, we help women who are small business owners to form groups and register themselves on the government portal, so as to be eligible for low or no interest loans, and register for government tenders. To date, we have been able to spread awareness on formalization of businesses and available opportunities after formalization to over 150-200 women at Kigogo, a district of Dar es Salaam. Of those, more than 50 have visited our offices for consultation and 10 women have successfully registered their business names.

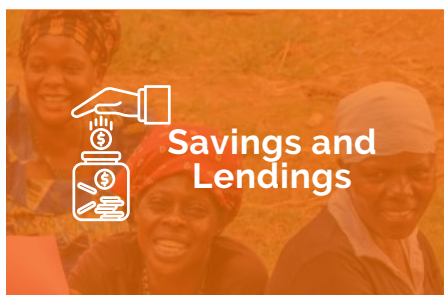
### What inspires you to continue this work?

Our belief is that if we guide women entrepreneurs to these opportunities they will increase their income. A majority of Women of Influence's team are entrepreneurs who have registered businesses, and are enjoying these opportunities themselves and hence, are passionate about replicating these strategies for women at the grassroots.



## Solutions We Support

Women First supports grassroots organizations working to advance economic empowerment for women, girls, and trans communities using these solutions.



Savings and  
Lendings



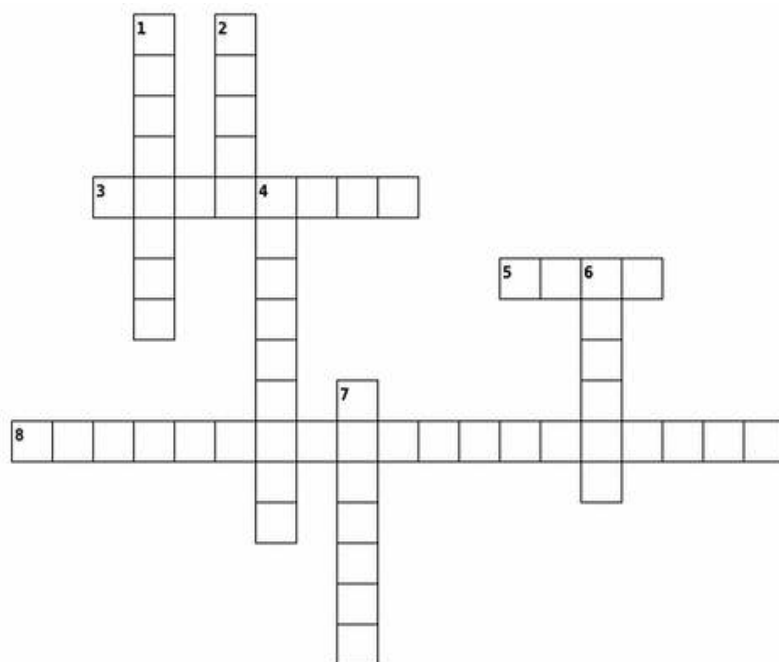
Business  
Development  
and  
Skills Training



Agribusiness



# How Well Do You Know Women First...?



## Across

- 3.** Learning exchanges, workshops and trainings are part of our \_\_\_\_\_ building program.
- 5.** We were founded in this year.
- 8.** We see this as a vehicle for gender equality.

## Down

- 1.** We fund grassroots groups in Uganda, Malawi, Kenya, and this East African country that touches all three major lakes in the continent.
- 2.** We fund women and trans people leading change in this country of South Asia.
- 4.** We regularly host these spaces for collective learning and connection.
- 6.** The period of time covered by our long term funding!
- 7.** Where we were born, also called the 'Big Apple'.

Answers: 1. Tanzania 2. India 3. Capacity 4. Convening 5. 1969 6. 6.years 7. New York 8. Economic empowerment

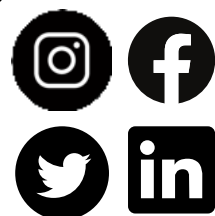
FOLLOW OUR CAMPAIGN

# 'WHEN WOMEN

# WIN':

highlighting the groundbreaking change caused by accomplishments and major 'wins' within the Women First community

\*CHECK OUT OUR SOCIAL MEDIA!



Stay tuned for more stories of resilience and impact!

**88%**

received their **first**  
**or only funding**  
**from Women First!**

We provide **flexible**  
funding for

**6**  
**years**

**63%**

of the groups we fund  
are orgs **5 years old**  
**or younger**

Women First's grantmaking has impacted **147,603**  
women, girls, trans people, and their communities!

Did you know that **only 0.9 % of all international funding**  
for gender equality **actually reaches grassroots groups?**  
For **54 years**, Women First has shifted resources to these  
**emerging, underfunded, and overlooked** changemakers.

**100%**

of your donations go **directly to our programs**  
supporting grassroots organizations leading  
economic empowerment for gender equality\*.

**Make [a donation](#) today to create a lasting impact!**

We are able to direct all funds raised to our programmatic impact because of a generous donor who deeply believed in Women First's mission and left us a bequest which exclusively covers the cost of all our non-program operating expenses.

Women First International Fund is a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit tax-exempt organization.

All donations made to Women First are fully tax-deductible by United States Federal Law. Our EIN is 23-7068080.