

IMPACT

REPORT 2022-23



We are each beautiful stars, and together: a powerful constellation.

Since 1969, **Women First International Fund** has collaborated with women and trans-led grassroots organizations to support community-driven solutions for **economic justice** and gender equality. Guided by the belief that long-term partnerships create lasting impact, we provide six years of **flexible funding** and **institutional strengthening** accompaniment to our grantee partners.



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CONNECTIONS

LETTER FROM THE ED

Connection is part of Women First's DNA, from our founding story to the way we engage partners today. After years of social distancing, 2023 has brought exciting opportunities to connect in-person with our network, grantee partners, and our globally-based staff team that has tripled in size since 2021. These experiences have renewed Women First's commitment to deepening our relationships in bold and value-aligned ways.

In July, I traveled to Kigali, Rwanda to attend the Women Deliver conference - one of the largest convenings in the world specifically addressing gender equality. I joined over **6,300** feminists representing **170** countries, and felt a deep sense of belonging in knowing that **we are not alone** in our mission to advance gender justice. There is so much more we can do together. Our connection to especially under-funded organizations positions us perfectly to be a **conduit: to create a flow of power and resources from institutions and allies to women- and trans-led groups advancing gender and economic justice in their communities.** I walked away with a sense of urgency to move Women First more purposefully into this role.

This past year, we facilitated a convening in Nairobi, Kenya, bringing together a cross-regional cohort of grantee partners who have collaborated with Women First for over four years to share their work and learn together. Together, we explored the ways in which diverse identities and issue areas influence barriers and strategies for change, and how we can be more attentive to these intersections as we support their visions. As we look to the future, we are envisioning new ways to connect, including across funding silos. With economic justice at our core, we increasingly use an intersectional feminist approach.

We are recommitting to connecting our donors to the contexts, challenges, and wins that grantee partners experience. We are forging new relationships with peer funders to learn and mobilize more and better resources for women and trans-led action for gender equality. **We invite you to join our journey.**

- Emily Forhman

SHOWING UP IN SOLIDARITY

Grassroots organizations are collaborating and building collective power in important ways, but **resources to come together are incredibly scarce.** Funds to attend global conferences like Women Deliver often feel out-of-reach.

This is something we hear time and again and we're translating learning into action by supporting grantee partners to come together in ways that align with their priorities - whether those be networking, advocacy, collective care, solidarity, fundraising, or simply being seen in an important space.

IN HER OWN WORDS

Rose Wambui Thuku, Nafisika Trust

After a thought-provoking panel discussion, I wanted to speak with a [widely-known] feminist leader who I admired, but she was surrounded by a circle of about 10 people. 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 that I wasn't alone.

I had my Women First community right there with me in Kigali, and I was representing all the formerly incarcerated women in Kenya who can't be at this conference, but who need their struggles to be understood and supported by the wider community of gender justice advocates.

So I walked up to the leader and even managed to exchange contact information and continue our conversation on LinkedIn!

I was at Women Deliver not just to be present, but to be heard.



OUR GRANTMAKING

WHO AND HOW WE FUND

Women First plays an important role in the funding ecosystem. We support grassroots organizations led by women and trans people whose work advances economic justice and who are paving the way for reimagined economies that center equity, justice, and dignity - for everyone. The groups we partner with are powerful and we want to see them resourced, heard, and respected.

UNDER RESOURCED

92%

have an annual operating budget of below \$50k.

EMERGING

68%

were founded 5 years ago or less.

COMMUNITY BASED

90%

based in the communities they serve.

SELF-LED

57%

leadership shares identities or lived experience with the people they serve

Our approach to grantmaking was designed with these organizations at the center.

Our funding is:

Long-term: Grantee partners receive funding for *at least six years*. Annual grant amounts increase at three key moments in the funding cycle.

Comprehensive: In addition to offering general support that groups can invest across their programs, operational, and institutional priorities, our team of in-region program staff offer tailored support around themes partners request, like fundraising and communications.

Transparent: We're clear about our criteria for funding and how decisions are made.

Responsive: The contexts that grantee partners are working in can change quickly - opportunities to influence an important stakeholder, a new virus taking hold globally, or a threatening bill that passes. We maintain the stability of our six-year funding, while responding to emerging or changing contexts.

Connective: We create opportunities for partners to share expertise with each other.

WHAT WE FUND

The status quo isn't working for women and trans people. Economies today are based on unsustainable and unequal models of production which exploit people and natural resources. These systems harm everyone; however, historically oppressed **women and trans people bear disproportionate costs of production, extraction, and environmental harm.**

Women First focuses our funding on Economic Justice. We support grassroots and community-based organizations led by women and trans people that work towards increased access to economic opportunities through community-led solutions that address **systemic barriers.**

VOC Rural Development Centre (VOCRDC), in **India**, is led by women social justice activists with a vision for transforming the realities of those most at risk of injustice in their community, like women and girls employed in stone quarries and brick kilns. With a focus on labor rights, VOCRDC advocates for favorable working conditions and for employers to adhere to existing laws and regulations that are in place to ensure working women's **safety, decent wages, and social protection.** VOCRDC creates awareness among women so that they, too, can stand up for workers' rights.

Founded **by and for survivors of gender-based violence**, Rebirth of a Queen, in **Kenya**, believes that every woman is valuable and powerful. With skills training for entrepreneurship, and programming at the intersection of economic justice and freedom from violence, the organization champions dignified and fulfilling work so that young women survivors can **thrive and be decision makers.** "In four years, it has become a movement - a space for growth, learning, and questioning what doesn't work right and for that which works right," says founder Pauline "Akinyi" Juma.

Mend Initiative, in **Uganda**, was founded in 2020 to advocate for equal social and economic rights for everyone, and to strengthen the inclusion of Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LBTQI+) womxn in Uganda's COVID-19 economic recovery process. With the world moving online during and post-pandemic, Mend Initiative is using **innovative digital strategies**, paired with programming like "financial stress management", "digital marketing" and "**know your labor rights**", to connect LBTQI+ people to knowledge, peers, resources, and markets.

Refugees themselves, the team leading Umoja Ni Nguvu Organization, in **Malawi**, knows how important economic justice is to widows and single mothers living in Dzaleka refugee settlement. Living among program participants, they experience the same challenges as the women they work with - dwindling food supplies, unequal pay, restricted access to work, and an increasingly severe climate causing hunger and thirst. With special attention to **food security and reliable income**, the group provides training in **modern farming techniques** that women can use to grow and sell food. "Every woman's wish is to be able to make her own financial decisions and to be able to sustain herself financially," a staff member says, "It provides them with a sense of **security and autonomy.**"

PARTNERS PER COUNTRY



In **2022**, 43 women and trans-led organizations made progress towards advancing economic justice in their communities.

Collectively, they impacted the lives of **150,000** women, girls, and trans people.

3,694
improved business skills

904
joined or rejoined community saving groups

664
increased their savings

294
women or trans-owned businesses launched

1,023
increased their monthly income

AT A GLANCE

Women First is a first or early funder for 88% of partners.

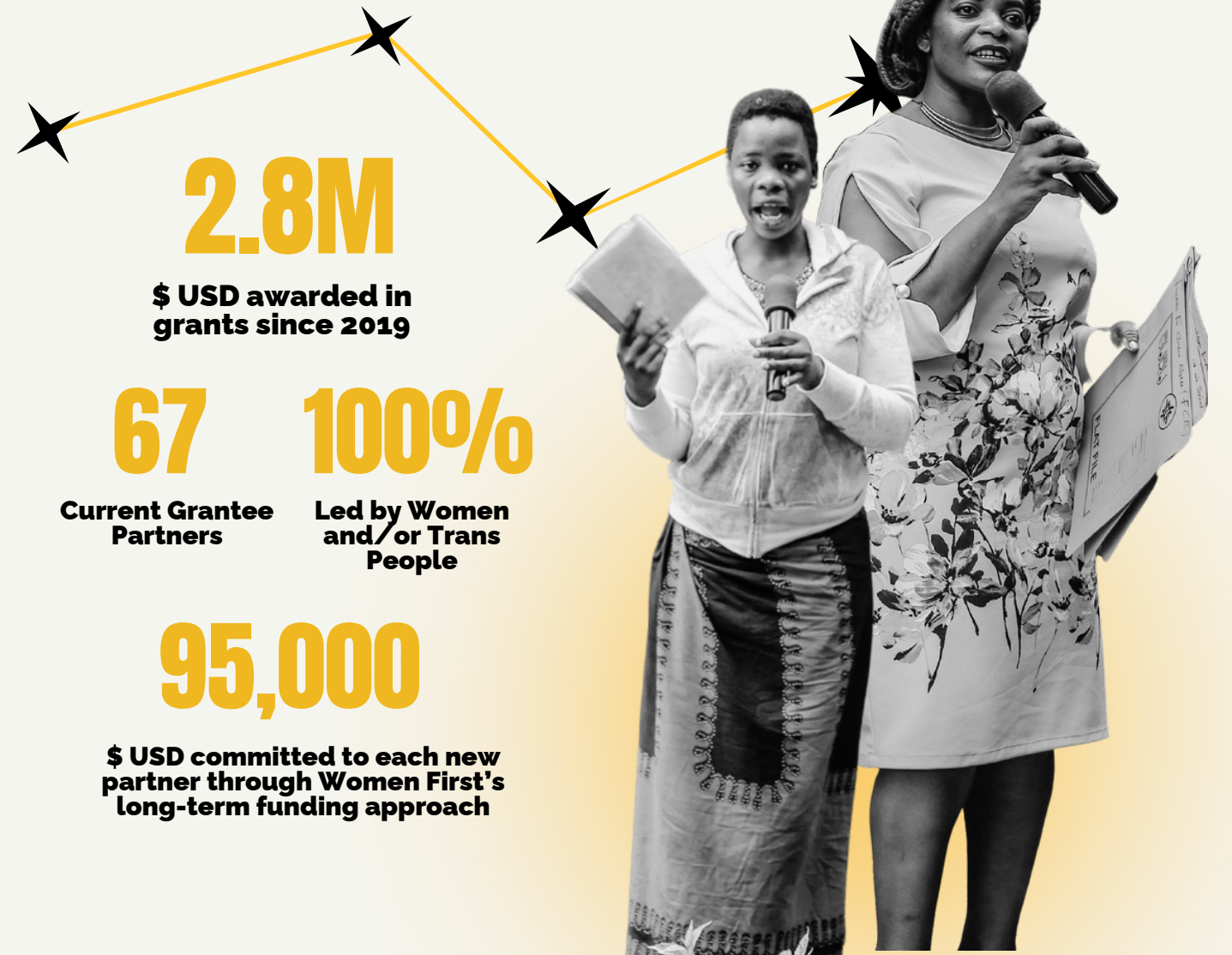
For community-based organizations with big visions, securing more resources and strengthening internal systems is important.

GROWING TEAMS

In 2022 alone, Women First grantee partners hired and trained **62 new staff**. Many of the groups we support are severely understaffed, which depletes team members' individual bandwidth, puts pressure on programs, and limits progress towards organizational goals. Expanding and compensating teams relieves pressure and unlocks potential.

UNLOCKING NEW FUNDS

Women First grantee partners raised nearly **\$900,000** USD and secured **95** resource partners to fuel their visions for change. For organizations led by women and trans people, which face enormous barriers to funding, **these numbers make a difference.**



CELEBRATING WINS PROGRAMS

RURAL WOMEN DEVELOPMENT TRUST

Breaking Chains

Three months ago, Alamelu Bannan received a phone call. The caller was seeking help to get out of a bonded labor situation in which she and her family work under exploitative conditions to repay a predatory debt. Bonded labor is all too familiar for women from the Arunthathiyar Dalit community, which Alamelu knows well. She experienced it herself as a girl. She brings this lived experience, and expertise from decades of relentless activism, to Rural Women Development Trust (RWDT), which she founded over 20 years ago.

RWDT envisions a world for Arunthathiyar women in which systemic injustices that feed exploitation are abolished. RWDT pressures the government and other stakeholders to change the laws, policies, economic systems, and community norms that keep Arunthathiyar people vulnerable to bonded labor. But the woman on the phone, and hundreds like her, can't wait. She needs a solution now.

RWDT's entrepreneurship program is designed for Arunthathiyar Dalit women who were in bonded labor and remain vulnerable to such exploitation. By creating micro-enterprises in coir rope, a product made from local raw materials, women can earn over \$1,875 USD per year. In bonded labor, they may earn \$3.13 per year. The difference in income is life-changing.

Financial Freedom

RWDT has called Women First a partner for over 5 years. Receiving a long-term commitment, Alamelu told us, was a momentous departure from reliance on small individual donations and short-term project funding. Flexible funds have allowed them to invest in the effectiveness and sustainability of their program, enabling them to buy machines that can shorten the length of time women need to produce rope and source larger quantities of raw material, which in turn, boosts productivity and increases incomes. RWDT has also been able to ensure that when women earn, they can save. In the past year alone, RWDT established a cooperative bank for the Arunthathiyar community, granting 256 people access to bank accounts and banking services. This is a critical step towards financial independence. Through banking services - too often unavailable to Dalit people - they can save the income earned through the micro-enterprises, build their assets, take out loans, learn how to manage their finances, and will be more resilient to economic shocks, like illness or death in the family.



Alamelu tells us that six years of funding has given them space "to think about how we can continue to build the financial resilience of women in our community and opportunities to engage in global dialogue on challenges faced by our community."

Women First is committed to economic justice, not only because we believe it is a right, but also because we know that economic justice programs like RWDT's have cross-cutting impacts that begin to unravel centuries-old injustices. Alamelu tells us, "The women working in the coir-weaving units are able to show up as leaders in the homes and the community at-large. From participating in local elections to standing up against sexual harassment in their own homes, the women we work with are speaking up. With three women partnering together to earn a living from each coir-weaving unit, we are collectively using resources to earn daily wages and share profits. Women experience a sense of community as they come together to discuss financial literacy, to learn about digital literacy focused on everyday tasks such as how to use an ATM, and this is powerful - it connects us in our struggles and our aspirations."

CONTEXT-RESPONSIVE CHANGE



In Uganda, as in nearly 30 African countries, laws inherited from British colonial rule have long criminalized homosexuality. However, a new bill signed in May 2023 by President Yoweri Museveni goes further, prescribing the death penalty for “aggravating homosexuality” or life imprisonment for certain same-sex acts. The bill explicitly aims “to protect the traditional family” by criminalizing persons who identify as lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, or with gender identities that fall outside the binary categories of male and female. This intensifies the threats, harassment, and oppressive tactics such as arbitrary arrests, evictions, forced disappearances and killings, or mob attacks directed at LGBTQI+ communities, further pushing them into cycles of social and economic exclusion.

Women First is committed to supporting LGBTQI+ partners in East Africa, particularly in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, amidst growing discriminatory laws. Our partners are building a resilient movement focused on harnessing individual and collective strength. They provide economic opportunities to LGBTQI+ individuals facing increased financial challenges due to anti-gender laws. Recognizing economic pathways as part of a broader vision for equity, they create community and solidarity with peer organizations, forming powerful alliances and support networks. Together, they advocate against discrimination and oppressive governments that seek to silence, erase, target and punish LGBTQI+ communities.



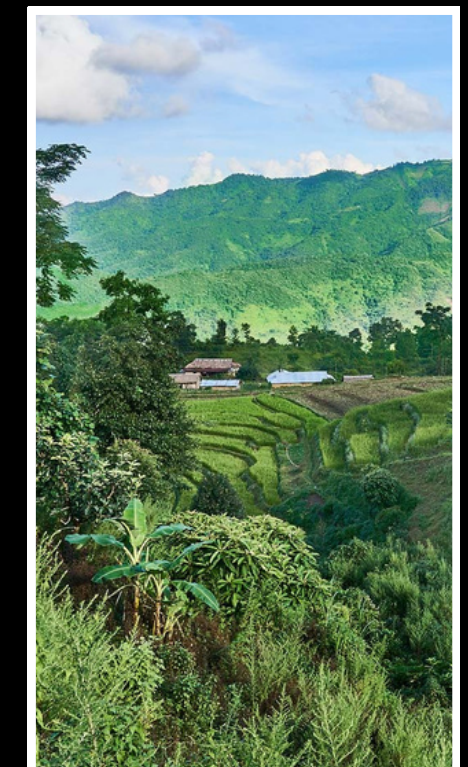
In Manipur, a northeastern Indian state, home to 3 major ethnic groups and over 30 indigenous communities, communal tensions revolve around land ownership and eligibility for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Scheduled Tribes are a constitutionally protected group in India comprising historically disadvantaged indigenous communities, who have specific rights through affirmative action, including reserved seats in educational and political institutions, government jobs, and land ownership opportunities. Manipur’s Meitei community, an ethnic majority residing in the prosperous valley, seeks ST status, a demand opposed by the under-resourced Kuki and Naga communities living in the hills, who fear that extending ST status to the Meiteis could exacerbate existing power imbalances.

Since May 2023, recent events including a High Court ruling in favor of the Meitei’s demand and ensuing protests deepened longstanding tensions and sparked widespread violence, with thousands of homes, villages, and religious sites destroyed, brutal acts of gender-based violence, the displacement of nearly 35,000 people, and the death of at least 180 people.

Prolonged internet shutdowns, limited media coverage, and a largely silent government, have created barriers for support to reach Manipur.

Based in Churachandpur, where the violence first erupted in May, Rural Women Upliftment Society (RWUS) has proactively led humanitarian efforts. Knowing that displaced people would need food, clothes, and shelter, and that government support was insufficient, RWUS rallied to action. “We went door to door collecting clothes,” says RWUS staff, “and gave them to the people in the camp. Most of the people who fled from villages are from a very poor family. That’s who we help. Most of the rich people left the state.”

RWUS also met with government officials and pushed for action to specifically support women whose livelihoods are most impacted by the instability. They demand influence in policy framing as the women of Manipur prepare for continued crisis.



CELEBRATING WINS INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING

MAD SISTERS

Situated on the outskirts of Nairobi and bordered by wealthy neighborhoods, Kibera is a maze of tin-roofed homes. The land is owned by the government and remains deliberately under-serviced. Most of Kibera's residents don't have legal rights as tenants and live with a persistent fear of eviction. The injustices of inequality are evident in the lack of clean water, sanitation, electricity, and healthcare.

For the young women leading Making a Difference (MAD) Sisters, Kibera is many things. First and foremost, it's home. The community-based organization, founded in 2014, has deep roots in Kibera. Its programs are informed by the teams' lived experiences growing up in the community. They envision a Kibera where safety and financial security is a reality for women and girls – and for MAD Sisters too. As a small community organization led by young Kenyan women in a community famous for crime and instability,

MAD Sisters faces multi-pronged barriers to funding and partnerships. Funders have long overlooked or underestimated them because of their budget size, their volunteer team, or their growing capacity to measure their impact.

"Women First creates room for sustainability and long-term stability," says Susan Mueni, MAD Sisters' founder, "the steady stream of flexible funding and support beyond dollars allows us to focus on long-term impact. **Women First are our sisters, not just our funders.**"

Over the past four years of Women First support, MAD Sisters has become more visible and been able to better balance investments in programmatic work with investments in improving their operations.

"People support what they see," Susan says. In the last year, MAD Sisters was able to dedicate Women First funds to increase their online presence. "It's a digital world now, and potential supporters would ask us for links to online content. We didn't have it. They'd move on." Now, MAD Sisters can be seen and heard online. For a team committed to ensuring that girls and women in Kibera are heard, amplifying their own voice has been a meaningful milestone.



Over time, program-restricted funding can weaken grassroots groups' abilities to build internal procedures, which in turn, makes them less attractive for support – a vicious cycle. MAD Sisters has been strategic about using dollars for capacity strengthening. They have put in place safeguarding and financial policies, and paid for staff to receive training in areas they prioritized, including communications. Like Women First, MAD Sisters believes that effective programs and effective operations are inextricably linked. And, like MAD Sisters, we believe in breaking harmful cycles.

Women First celebrates organizational milestones like the ones that MAD Sisters achieved not only because we are champions of our partners, but because the impact of supporting organizations to invest in themselves (how they believe is best) is enormous and too often overlooked. Around 60% of people in Nairobi live in informal settlements like Kibera.

MAD Sisters collaborates with community-based organizations agitating for change across these communities. To this collective organizing, they bring their lived experiences, their technical program expertise, and their connections to funders and partners.



WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

GO BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE COLLECTIVE

Women First is intentional about gathering feedback, insight, and input from grantee partners, resource partners, and peers.

Here's what we're hearing:

Resilience is needed for everything you do...what is needed to build resilience?

REAL CHANGE REQUIRES COLLECTIVE CARE

ACCOUNTABILITY NEEDS TO BE MUTUAL

CROSS-CUTTING SOLUTIONS CREATE LASTING IMPACT

EMBRACE DIVERSE IDEAS OF SUCCESS

+ GROWTH & RESILIENCE



LOOKING AHEAD

LEANING INTO OUR VALUES

For Women First, 2024 will be a year of learning, intentional listening, and translating lessons into action. We will be investing in a professionally-guided and deeply reflective process to understand how we can continue to show up for women and trans-led organizations in ways that advance their individual and **collective power**. We'll explore how we can **deepen our accountability to partners** with an improved understanding of how their everyday realities influence immediate goals and broader visions for change. And, we'll pose challenging questions about our identity, purpose, and priorities. This process will be grounded in our belief that **expertise is drawn from lived experience**. It will culminate in a 2025 Strategic Plan.

As we embark on this learning journey, we remind ourselves that we are here to shift power to those who know what their communities need, those who are already doing what it takes to drive transformative change, those whose solutions, leadership, and aspirations remain historically silenced and invisibilized.



JOIN US

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

Reach: those least heard, most under-funded, and disproportionately affected

Place-Based Expertise: Staff from the countries where we make grants use knowledge of historical, social, political, and economic contexts to lead programs

Reflection: We changed our strategy when we understood how partners could be more comprehensively supported, and we continue to solicit and act on feedback

Listening: Our supporters are partners. We endeavor to connect with donors authentically and facilitate meaningful engagement on the issues closest to us

Community: We are striving to create community where philanthropists can come together and learn with staff, thematic experts, and grantee partners

If you're interested in supporting Women First contact Director of Advancement, Ana Pecova, at apecova@womenfirstfund.org



YOUR SUPPORT

MAKES A DIFFERENCE

The data is clear – not enough funding is reaching women's rights and feminist organizations. Despite urgent calls to action, **99%** of development aid and foundation grants do not directly reach these groups. The organizations that Women First supports, who exist at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalization (LGBTQI+, youth, refugee, indigenous) receive only a fraction of this. And it's not just *who* is not getting funding, it's also *what* – **less than 0.5%** of foundation grants are allocated towards women's rights. Given these facts, it's not surprising that almost 90% of Women First grantee partners raised less than \$30,000 USD last year.

Every dollar you donate to Women First matters, because we are investing these dollars into changing the unjust reality of funding for feminist action.

Your generosity is not just a financial gift; it is a symbol of solidarity and a testament to the transformative power of collective action. It tells us that **together, we are a force for change.**

THANK YOU!



**Women First International Fund is a
U.S. based 501(c)(3) organization. All
donations are fully tax-deductible.**

125 Park Ave., 25th Fl.
New York, NY 10017 USA
+1 (212) 213-0622
info@womenfirstfund.org