

WEATHERING THE STORM

RESOURCING GIRLS AND YOUNG ACTIVISTS THROUGH A PANDEMIC



As the realities of COVID-19 began to unfold in early 2020, it became clear that girls and young women, trans and non binary people – already battling the compounding effects of patriarchy, white supremacy and imperialist extraction – would be the very worst affected. Like any other crisis, the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the existing systemic oppression and violence that positions girls and young people as particularly vulnerable, especially girls who face multiple forms of oppression.

The Global Resilience Fund was born in May 2020, by those across the funding ecosystem committed to resourcing girls and young feminists' activism, who recognised that something bold and propositional was required in this moment. Set-up as a temporary, experimental, and rapid response fund, housed and facilitated by Purposeful, it brought together the resources and intellectual energy of 25 funders from a diverse range of institutions, including women's funds, private foundations, INGOs, multi-laterals, and bi-lateral agencies. Rooted in the principles of trust, solidarity and reciprocity, they stepped out of the business-as-usual models to find new ways to move flexible resources to girls and young activists and directly support their brave and transformative strategies. The Global Resilience Fund demonstrates that it is not only possible to fund girls and young activists now, but that to do so is essential for our collective liberation.

Grounded in a feminist power analysis, the fund has created space to build collaboration, avoid competition, and allow for a shared vision that puts partnership central. Intentionally holding an explicit intersectional lens from the beginning, and with participation and leadership across such a diversity of funder and non-funder activists, this has deepened and strengthened the political analysis held through the process.

At the heart of the fund is a participatory decision-making model with a panel of girls and young activists from 32 countries, all playing a central role in the grantmaking design. They challenged all aspects of the process, from decision-making pathways through to which questions were asked in the proposals and how those proposals were scored, making the process stronger and more inclusive. Most critically, two disability rights activists serve as fund advisors. Their participation and leadership resulted in the fund resourcing an unprecedented number of disability rights groups, so often overlooked and underfunded. This is just one example of how an inclusive and participatory process has led to better grantmaking. The fund also reached other groups often excluded from funding opportunities, such as trans girls and young women and non-binary young people.

**BETWEEN MAY –
DECEMBER 2020,**
the fund supported

234

**GRASSROOTS
GROUPS** from

91

countries

and leveraged over

\$1 MILLION

in direct support.

Every organisation funded is led by young activists under 30 years-old, with 25% under the age of 19, and the vast majority unregistered.

THE GLOBAL RESILIENCE FUND IN ACTION



We have learned from the contributions of activist panelists and grantee partners about the context, now harsher than ever with the pandemic still unfolding, of authoritarianism and anti-gender movements on the rise. Funded LGBTQAI+ groups have reflected on the extremely challenging hostile environment that they operate in, and continue to share stories from across the world of girls and young feminists organising against restrictions, scarce resources and protection. Among many of the extreme challenges cited, are the increased rates of FGM being reported, where lockdowns and fear of the virus may be leading to a re-emergence of previously abandoned social norms in some communities. It was against this backdrop that young activists were funded in critical roles across the frontline; from those creating shelters for their communities, working as health responders and care service providers to those setting up mental health services, suicide hotlines and safe abortion accompaniment, to other groups distributing basic resources of food, masks, and menstrual pads.

Resources continue to be hard to access for girl and young feminist-led groups, and feminist movements at large. We are at a time where reimagining and realising alternatives is a powerful antidote to our unravelling systems. The Global Resilience Fund is showing us what it takes to resource young activists' resistance in a crisis in truly responsive ways,

and the practices deployed to shift power and reach those usually shut out from traditional philanthropic processes. Essential, is the move away from functional reporting to create spaces for open learning. By starting with stories rather than measurement metrics, there is a much more authentic picture of change that can inform funding models, and a new methodology where experience and stories serve as evidence and proof points.

The fund lowered barriers to access and apply, with questions designed by young feminists that mirrored the language that girls and young activists use about their own organising. In Sierra Leone, girls could apply over WhatsApp voice note and telephone call-back, removing the obstacles of literacy or no internet and the fund often met girls where they were, quite literally. Where needed, teams travelled with grants in cash, housed in special metal boxes, to groups that were unregistered to allow them to continue their work. For grantee partners across the world, rather than require written agreements in a language they didn't understand, girls made collective commitments in ceremonies that formed the basis of accountability.

The fund consciously shifted away from seeing polarities as problems to be solved, to view them instead as natural tensions in a complex system, whose independent and seemingly contradictory state, need to be navigated as critical for overall success.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The humanitarian sector is divided by siloes that are focused on immediate response needs and are often top-down in their approach, leaving little room for community-based work and much less work led by girls, trans youth and young feminists. Furthermore, traditional humanitarian response efforts often fail to reach adolescent girls and young women and make invisible their incredible work during crises.

In the midst of the pandemic, girls and young activists have demonstrated the transportative power of this moment to visibilise, name, challenge, and re-imagine the root causes and corrupt social contracts, structures, and policies that currently define so much of our world.

Moving resources to young activists is full of complexity, tension, and the profound possibility for transformation, and the Global Resilience Fund demonstrates that a new kind of humanitarian response is possible. It has created a more democratic model of philanthropy by its pooled funding mechanism, shared governance, participatory grantmaking and a rich environment of respect and learning for all stakeholders.

The *Weathering the Storm* report lifts up a diversity of voices from across the globe and from the funder and activist communities who came together to power this feminist fund. Drawing from lessons learned, it captures the impact of COVID-19 on girls and young activists, their creative and brave strategies to respond to the pandemic, often against the backdrop of other crises. As the Global Resilience Fund moves into a new phase through 2021, these in-process learnings ensure our own practices remain responsive and accountable to this extraordinary community. If we take these early lessons as a starting point, we begin to see both the imperative and the real-life possibilities of funding young feminist-led strategies, and if we hold these possibilities close, with love and liberation as a guiding light, we might better weather future storms together.

We are at a crossroads of crisis and of possibility. As the pandemic worsens for many across the world, the need to think carefully about what comes next is critical. What is needed now from funders is bold leadership and a willingness to trust and resource movements not only to survive but thrive through this period.



THE FULL
WEATHERING THE
STORM REPORT
CAN BE READ
HERE.

THE STORIES AND
REFLECTIONS
OF THE ACTIVIST
ADVISOR PANEL
CAN BE READ
HERE.

KEY TAKEAWAYS & LEARNINGS:



ON YOUNG FEMINIST REALITIES:

Young feminists are organising against the backdrop of violence and repression, yet they bring creativity, joy, love, and liberatory tactics to all that they do. Despite the odds, they are creating long-term strategies for change, whilst meeting the immediate needs of their communities in and beyond the pandemic.

- **Crisis layered on crisis;** This pandemic is one crisis layered on top of many others; from the climate crisis to other intersecting political crises. Young activists and broader feminist movements are experiencing increased violence and backlash during the pandemic. The context is harsher than ever, authoritarianism on the rise, anti-gender movements stronger and more well-resourced and many governments are using the pandemic as an excuse to crack down on civil freedoms and increase surveillance and security.
- **Front line response:** young activists are frontline health responders, providing care services, distributing basic resources and creating spaces of shelter for themselves and each other, includes providing menstrual pads, masks, access the justice system, accompanying safe abortions and more. With the failure of governments, this service provision is deeply political and is feminist organising. With the Delta Variant and many young people unvaccinated in many countries - young people are particularly at risk.
- **Severe mental health challenges:** Young people are experiencing mental health challenges, trauma, economic hardship and loss as a life in the time of the Pandemic. Many groups have not been able to prioritise their own mental health or process their own trauma, focusing primarily on serving their communities.
- **Young feminist activists ground themselves in the practices of care, healing, and trauma relief.** Despite the challenges, in the pandemic many groups have strengthened bonds of solidarity, with young feminist-led solidarity economies and informal support networks springing up across the globe. Some providing mental health services - suicide hotlines, with psychologists and accompaniment. **Young Feminist resilience is generated through their ability to weave community and practice solidarity with each other.**
- **Persistence:** as the state and traditional agencies retreated, and lockdown took hold, girls and young women have been responding and organising in their communities, faced with the challenges of meeting in-person, young feminist activists adapted, identifying creative ways to continue organising and care for their communities, SMS and radio and have tapped into relief distribution networks and existing community outreach systems.
- **Resource gap continues to be stark:** Young feminists are already experiencing a serious lack of resourcing, and as many self-fund their initiatives, increased job losses and limitations on movement have made this even more challenging than usual. Resources continue to be scarce, restricted and hard to access for girls, with some of the changing regulations - even harder to receive foreign income, and also some money only focussed on the covid response, meaning things remain unfunded.

ON RESOURCING RESISTANCE THROUGH A PANDEMIC AND BEYOND:

This moment calls on us as funders and allies to show up with the bravery and resilience that young feminists bring to their work every day. In order to reach them at the scale and speed they deserve, we must step out of our business-as-usual models and find new ways to move resources to support this work.

- **We must lower barriers to access** and broaden the decision making table to truly reach young activists organising at the margins. Reaching girl-led collectives and first-time funded, unregistered groups means we must get creative about how we spread the word, receive proposals, make decisions and distribute funds. Even the most functional of activities like signing grant-agreements, need to be radically re-imagined in the service of young activists' own structures and visions.

- **An openness to be courageous and take risks** is essential to supporting work to sustain and flourish. In fact, our ability to respond to what is ahead depends on it. The collective willingness to embrace messiness, hold tensions and contradictions, and to be constantly learning together is critical.
- Bringing an **intersectional lens** from the beginning, enables funding to reach girls and young women who are often excluded from funding opportunities. The participation and leadership of a diversity of funder and non funder activists, deepens and strengthens the political analysis and ability to be intersectional.
- We need a **thriving ecosystem of organisations resourcing** this work at every level. There is a need for diverse funders to find ways to come together in moments of crisis. A thriving funding ecosystem for girls and young women involves different funders playing different roles. This means recognising our limitations and working to nourish different actors within the funding ecosystem.

