

The Response of the Women's Fund Tanzania Trust During COVID-19

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the African continent faces complex questions of social, economic, and political resilience. In the more than 25 years since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, there have been numerous advances in gender equality within national and international institutions, legal frameworks and policy mandates, as well as in approaches aimed at securing sexual and reproductive health and rights, LGBTI rights and political and economic rights, among other areas. While many African countries made progress in terms of instituting progressive laws and policies to address gender inequalities, implementation of laws remains a challenge and, as a result, women continue to face discrimination in matters of personal law such as marriage, inheritance, citizenship/nationality and access to property and land (African Union Commission, 2018).

Added to this, COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls across the region. The pandemic has exacerbated the burdens of unpaid care work, increasing risks of gender-based violence, impacting livelihoods of women disproportionately – especially in the informal sector, and reducing access to sexual and reproductive health care (Mahuku, 2020).

However, the narrative on the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of African women cannot be limited to their vulnerability. There is also a need to pay attention to their leadership and their ability to survive, mobilise and organise during times of crisis. COVID-19 has highlighted, once again, that during epidemics, governments make difficult decisions generally – responding to COVID-19 as a health crisis and often not taking into account people's social and economic needs. As a result, grassroots movements—usually feminist and women-led ones—have stepped up in response to the pandemic, providing frontline services and support to the marginalised, advocating for gender-responsive policy agendas and demanding government accountability for human rights.

Covid-19 in Tanzania

Tanzania's first coronavirus case was reported on 16 March 2020. Following this, the government announced several measures to curb the spread of the virus, such as closing down all schools and colleges and suspending all sports events and gatherings. The government also embarked on an awareness campaign that focused on preventive measures such as handwashing, the use of sanitisers, and mask wearing. The number of passengers in public transport was cut as commuter buses were only allowed to carry seated passengers. No lockdown was instituted, but for a while it seemed the country was complying with basic prevention measures recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Shangwe, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic was treated as a national health emergency and disaster due to its impact on the economy and implications for the public health system. In the spirit of national solidarity, businesses, corporates and individuals were called on to support the government's efforts to combat the virus. This was based on the understanding that including the private sector in disaster management reduces risks and duplication of efforts, especially in an environment where coordination is weak. Government also partnered with civil society organisations in channelling donations of medical supplies and technological gadgets in the efforts to combat Covid-19.

Unlike other countries that instituted stringent measures to minimise the short-, medium- and long-term effects of the pandemic, though, the Tanzanian government revoked the initial restrictions, and formulated guidelines for mandatory quarantine, mandatory testing, health service provision, and management of social services provision and social activities. These guidelines were not strictly enforced and were a way to "perform" compliance to international standards for tourists coming into the country, and for truck drivers and others needing to cross regional borders.

Despite the virus having reached the country, hospitals filling up, and increased burials, efforts were only directed to education sectors and a few other areas, especially those involving mass gatherings, but excluding marketplaces. This lax stance made people reluctant to observe social distancing, wear masks, or maintain sanitary habits. President Magufuli's outright denial of the severity of the health crisis impacted on the country's prevention efforts and allowed the virus to spread unabated. Prior to his death, the government maintained that it would not accept the coronavirus vaccine until there was sufficient proof of its efficacy. Instead, it would concentrate on the promotion of natural remedies to treat "infectious diseases".

The above political context meant that the mere mentioning of COVID-19 became taboo, with government and media reports adopting the use of the terms “respiratory challenge” or, simply, “pneumonia” instead. Face masks became a political statement, with President Magufuli at times praising those who did not wear them. During one meeting, a mayor of Moshi municipality even ordered mask-wearing councillors to take them off or leave. It is within this context that the role of civil society groups became critical to prioritise the lived realities of people during a pandemic, given the denialism by government.

As expected, support for already strained, over-stretched, and under-resourced grassroots and women’s rights organisations is key during such a pandemic. Hence, the role of women’s funds becomes critical in providing to activists, groups, organisations, and movements. As the COVID-19 crisis impacts countries’ economies and funders’ finances severely, women’s funds have been positioned to move quickly, adapting to a rapidly changing context. Women’s funds have experience in responding to crises (e.g., earthquakes) by providing immediate relief and long-term support for women’s and communities’ recovery, self-reliance, and reactivation of their economies. Not only is their contribution an important part of the continent’s crisis response, but it is necessary to sustain the protection of the rights of women, girls, and other marginalised groups within society.

This article focuses on the work of the Women’s Fund Tanzania, looking, in particular, at the strategies during this time, as well as discussing the broader significance of this work in supporting women’s rights agendas during and post COVID-19.

The Women’s Fund Tanzania Trust

The Women’s Fund Tanzania Trust (WFT-T) (the “Fund”) is the only national feminist fund in Tanzania and in East Africa. The dream behind the drive to create a women’s-only funding modality in Tanzania started as early as 2003, as the founders realised that women’s voices, visibility, and contributions to achieve empowerment and social justice would remain unseen and undervalued unless adequate funding reached them. Officially, WFT-T was established in 2006. At this time, globally, there was increasing awareness that resources for women’s rights agendas had already been shrinking, and studies conducted by the women’s movement in Tanzania highlighted the challenges of the funding landscape for women’s movements (Rematullah and Chigudu, 2017).

WFT-T started with modest resources but has progressively built on its successes and positioned itself as a relevant and responsive institution supporting constituency and alliance building, agenda setting, and organising for social justice. In 2011, the Fund had its first operational year starting with a pilot grant making programme combined with a strong mentorship programme.

Even prior to COVID-19, WFT-T wanted their grant making to: (i) lead to increased capacities and potential of women's movement(s), women's organisations, women's groups, and individual women, especially at the local level, to contribute to change; (ii) contribute to enhanced capacity and better-equipped stakeholders in order to protect and promote women's rights and (iii) support collective action of a widened circle of actors (Women's Fund Tanzania, 2016).

WFT-T work is aimed at addressing the root causes of gender inequality through a combination of fundraising, grant making, resource mobilisation, and capacity building. The Fund works closely with the women's movement in Tanzania to ensure that the limited resources of WFT-T are used tactically and strategically. In particular, WFT-T has, from the outset, prioritised smaller grassroots movements or communities that may struggle to access mainstream funding due to a lack of resources or capacities. For many groups, the funding from WFT-T has been the only financial resource they have been able to access.

As such, since establishment, WFT-T has gone a long way to support community-based women's rights initiatives working on promoting issues of sex-workers' rights, women's disability rights, adolescent girls and sexuality rights, adolescent girls and leadership skills, young women's rights and decent employment, and women's political rights. Furthermore, WFT-T has catalysed and given birth to cross-sectoral alliances/coalitions within and outside of the women's movements and cutting-edge agendas driven from the bottom up and fuelled by the deep political visions of various constituents of women's movements. These alliances not only bridge geographies and issue silos, but they also cross the otherwise deep divides of class, rural-urban, ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality, and age.

WFT-T's Response During the Pandemic

WFT-T's ability to respond timeously and flexibly has played a role in enabling local women's rights organisations to pivot to meet unexpected challenges during the pandemic response and recovery. Not only have women's rights organisations had

to adapt to the new realities presented by the pandemic, but they have also had to amplify their advocacy for more caring and just societies.

Soon after the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Arusha in February 2020, more cases were reported. WFT-T management and its Board came together to devise strategies that would simultaneously ensure that the staff remained safe and the Fund's agenda was protected – i.e., it would have a concrete way of responding during a pandemic such that the mandate of promoting women's rights, while fostering an enabling environment for the growth of a gender-sensitive society through grant making and capacity strengthening, was not eroded. This meant that the Fund's response to the pandemic was inherently related to its mission focused on the protection of the rights of women, young girls, and children.

Using WFT-T's positioning, one of the most immediate actions of the Fund was to mobilise resources to ensure that there were additional resources to respond to the emergent realities of women, girls, children, and the marginalised, as well as the sustainability of the broader women's rights agenda. WFT-T successfully managed to secure new funds and confirm fund reallocation to support with both practical needs for life survival as well as fund programmes that addressed the emerging impacts of COVID-19, like GBV. From this experience, WFT-T learnt that while all the Fund's funding partners were supportive and flexible, for some, their internal systems were not oriented to be flexible enough to enable its responsive grant making processes to function as the situation on the ground demanded.

Notwithstanding these challenges, WFT-T was able to send out a call for proposals through various outlets including the Fund's website and several media outlets. In order to effectively respond to the many proposals for funding during the pandemic, WFT-T, with board approval, launched a new grantmaking window known as the fast responsive window. This called for the re-organisation of the internal staff grant making review teams and the external review team (comprised of diverse representation of members of civil society and women's movements). This enabled WFT-T to shorten the grant approval time from three months to one month.

In total, during 2020, WFT-T received 641 applications (as part of the COVID-19 Special Call) across the country and 42 were approved and funded. The amount disbursed across funded thematic areas totalled TZS600,000 million (US\$238,432) (Women's Fund Tanzania, 2021).

Through funding support during the pandemic, WFT-T was able to support movement building and awareness raising of COVID-19 across the whole society

and promote intersectionality of agendas in addressing COVID-19's effects on the rights of women, young girls, and children. Furthermore, support from the Fund enhanced the capability of duty bearers in responding to and supporting victims of violence within the COVID-19 context.

The Significance of WFT-T's Work During the Pandemic (and Beyond)

A responsive and empowering funding mechanism that supports diverse strategies

WFT-T's intention is to provide a funding mechanism that is empowering. For the Fund, it means that resourcing is done in a manner that goes beyond financial support to include capacity building, bridge-building and, ultimately, the brokering of relationships between diverse actors so that they limit working in silos. More than half of WFT grants are accompanied by capacity building, including ways of organising or strengthening women's leadership and confidence as citizens and political actors (Wilson, 2021).

The resulting impact of this approach to resourcing has meant that a range of actors that may not have had the opportunities or possibilities (such as grassroots groups, rural-based groups, young women's initiatives, sex worker led groups, and trans groups) were strengthened in their activism and leadership such that they were able to connect their own struggles to other struggles and strengthened their organising power. A review of the Fund's funding strategies prior to COVID-19 shows it investing in diverse organising strategies. Despite there being a multitude of strategies and interventions by grantee partners, what the strategies have in common when woven together in a combined narrative is that there are many ways in which groups may view and understand their realities, as well as how they choose to address them. The other common feature is that, when put together, these different strategies are a demonstration of the multiple forms of agency that are being activated through WFT grantmaking in transforming patriarchal norms and structures.

During COVID-19, the Fund was able to concretely demonstrate how to be responsive in its grantmaking work. The Fund's usual processes of connecting to priorities of different actors in the national context included consultation and engagement with different actors and stakeholders, as well as an annual scoping

exercise (building on grant analysis). These processes enabled the Fund to have a nuanced understanding of the different issues and strategies that require resourcing with the ultimate objective of advancing the agenda for gender quality and social justice within the local context (Wilson, 2021). During COVID-19, the Fund paid even more attention to consultation and engagement with a wide range of movement actors to understand which areas needed more support and attention during the crisis. As a result, the Fund was able to invest in the following strategies:

- *Movement Building*. Support to organisations with strategic interventions designed to promote movement building agendas within the COVID 19 context. For example, supporting convenings to develop strategies responding to women's rights abuses during the pandemic.
- *Children's rights*. Support of remote education for children, including virtual learning and supply of home-based learning material as well as responding to the National Plan of Action on Ending Violence against Women and Children.
- *Sexual reproductive health rights (SRHR)*. Support to scale up awareness on SRHR issues to adolescent girls and emergency responses to SRHR needs.
- *GBV and Sextortion*. Support for strategic initiatives seeking to combat GBV, particularly sexual corruption; for example, running helplines for victims of domestic violence during the crisis; establishment of a dedicated helpline, designed to respond to cases of GBV; and targeting domestic workers as a marginalised group. Also, dedicated support was allocated to sex workers during the crisis.
- *Media*. Focused support on enhancing visibility and creating debates around women's rights issues. The interventions were designed to play a critical role in investigating and reporting violations on women, girls, children, and other marginalised groups throughout the crisis.

WFT-T's ability to respond rapidly and timeously to the pandemic as the effects were emerging is demonstrative of a grant making model that is responsive and flexible. The Fund was able to build on existing strategic priorities, as well as to remain agile in response to the unplanned and unexpected crisis of COVID-19. This responsive, relevant, and empowering aspect of grant making has been affirmed by grantees as well as partners in previous research conducted on the Fund's work.

Supporting multiple levels of organising

WFT-T has a strong commitment to building diverse alliances across Tanzanian society such that the emerging agenda for women's rights takes into account the diverse realities of women and girls based on intersections of power related to economic status, location, religion, sexuality, ability, and other factors. This is expressed in the following foundational principle of WFT-T:

“women, across all levels of society, have the potential to effect change in their own lives and that of their communities.”

In many ways, this forms the basis for the ways in which WFT-T nurtures and supports strategic action by women to transform their own realities, particularly at the local level, to increase their voice, visibility, and impact. Emanating from an analysis of the different forms of power, access and capacity of different groups, the Fund prioritises support in the form of financial resources, as well as capacity strengthening and mentoring processes for “underserved and marginalised,” as well as rural and remote women's groups and organisations.

It is within this framework that WFT-T has been able to divert increased resources for this category of actors. An important part of this strategic focus for WFT-T has been a commitment to learning about the different ways groups (particularly at the grassroots level) are using those resources to realise rights, and to understand what additional forms of support they need to support their increased voice and visibility. This is an important contribution of WFT-T in building the narrative of how diverse forms of feminist organising are evolving, and identifying current challenges in building and sustaining vibrancy of movements.

Prior to COVID-19, more than a third of WFT-T's funding went to support community-based initiatives as a demonstration of this commitment (Wilson, 2021). During COVID-19, funding through the Special Call was aggregated as follows: 88% of funding went to support grants at national level, while 12% went to support community-based initiatives. Given the urgency to respond, and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic, it was decided that a larger portion of funding would go to support national organisations. The decision was based on the recognition that organisations at the national level were positioned to respond quickly and

had the necessary institutionalised financial systems to strategically advance the Fund's agenda. Nevertheless, this contribution remains significant, given that it is in addition to other funding allocated to this grouping during a time when the need for resourcing was extremely urgent.

The approach of supporting organising and feminist responses at multiple levels is part of WFT-T's strategy to expand the number of actors that have enhanced conceptual and ideological clarity (on feminist and rights agendas and approaches). In COVID-19, while remaining true to the original intents and approaches, WFT-T had to respond quickly, cognisant of risks, while channelling resources to actors that were positioned to address issues as they emerged during the COVID-19 crisis.

Supporting and facilitating movement building

WFT-T also has a strong emphasis on movement building in their grant making and programmatic work. This is based on the Fund's recognition that resourcing is just one critical precondition to the success and sustainability of women's movements in the country. In supporting this commitment, WFT-T actively fosters and supports linkages and alliances by playing an active role in convening and resourcing strategic alliances. In particular, WFT-T, through strategic coalitions, brings together actors across all levels of the society, to ensure greater voice and visibility are given to potentially marginal voices.

At the same time, for the groups that WFT-T supports in terms of capacity strengthening, encouraging their participation in different coalitions is a way to advance the underlying belief that it is important to support and strengthen smaller, less visible actors and organisations to engage and join the actions of other actors at the national level.

In the Fund's COVID-19 work, support was provided for initiatives that responded to the immediate effects of the pandemic. For example, support was provided to reduce mental-health-related suicidal cases through the establishment of an online counselling structure (tele-counselling). Online platforms resulted in more than 4,500 calls from various community members, men as well as women. Another type of support provided included funding for the protection of communities that might face double marginalisation, such as sex workers, domestic workers, persons with disability, the elderly, and children. Support was provided to respond

to violence as well as to supply protective gears. WFT-T also supported efforts to assist remote communities to access justice structures in reporting GBV targeting women, young girls, and children during the lockdown.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, WFT-T had strategically funded selected organisations at national level, with the aim of supporting the formation of platforms that would bring together various sections and types of women formations. These platforms, such as the Constitutional Coalition and the Sextortion Coalition, have played an important role in providing opportunities and space for women's rights actors to come together, dialogue, network, and share experiences and lessons on the progress made in addressing women's rights violations in their various manifestations in the Tanzanian context. During COVID-19, the Fund continued to convene with different women's rights actors online, given that public gathering and community mobilising was limited. This was to ensure that, as different communities were grappling with the realities of a pandemic, leaders from within women's movements could come together to share experiences and ideas and strategise collectively in relation to the pandemic and even beyond.

These types of engagements informed the Fund's broader COVID-19 movement-building response that ultimately led to existing (and new) grantee partners being required to amend their interventions to accommodate COVID-19-related strategies. In addition, different actors were requested to think through and propose possibilities for movement building as part of their proposals. Even prior to COVID-19, the Fund played an active role in encouraging other actors to include marginalised groups and actors: those that were often operating under the radar; often small, unregistered groups and collectives whose voice might be drowned out in mainstream civil society spaces. On the part of the Fund, there was a desire to learn how different groups were addressing the effects of COVID-19, and what the insights were in relation to building and strengthening organising on the rights of women, young girls, and children. Thus, as part of WFT-T's response during COVID-19, the emphasis was not only on supporting immediate needs, but also on more strategic concerns for women's movements. As such, WFT-T provided support for executive directors and senior staff from women's rights organisations and groups to reflect, share experience and provide support on how to sustain their women's rights agendas during the crisis. In this way, WFT-T ensured that it kept in focus not only immediate concerns, but also the longer-term concerns of organising and mobilising for gender equality. Other examples of movement-building support

included dialogues at different levels with different groups such as adolescents and community-based activists.

The results of such movement-building work enhanced the capability of marginalised communities in advocating for their rights within the COVID-19 context. This is also significant, given the often-limited visibility and voice of marginalised communities and actors in addressing inequalities and injustices. One example cited by WFT-T is the empowerment of a group of women with disabilities to voice their experiences, and the particular forms of abuse and other human rights abuses experienced during COVID-19. At a movement level, this is critical for inclusion in a broader women's rights agenda nationally.

Furthermore, the Fund also linked local women's movements to regional and global networks and made provision to capture and document women's struggles through feminist writing that aimed to tell emergent and existing stories as well as capacitate a new generation of feminist writers.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that an account of women's realities during the COVID-19 pandemic would be incomplete without highlighting the resilience and responsiveness of women's rights actors during a trying time. However, at the same time, while there has been increased recognition of the central role played by national and local organisations in humanitarian action during the COVID-19 crisis, the reality is that their efforts often lack both political and financial support. There do seem to be shifts in awareness among the donor community, with the recognition that resourcing for women's rights agendas is not being equitably distributed, with larger amounts of funding going to bigger international NGOs. Yet, the most flexible money tailored to the priorities and needs of locally-led feminist movements sit in the smallest pools – i.e., resources from women's funds, a small number of private foundations, and autonomous resources that feminist movements generate themselves.

On the one hand, this article provides an account of the work of WFT-T during COVID-19 and speaks to resourcing the responsiveness of a range of actors at a time when governments have failed to plan for and respond to the social and economic vulnerabilities of diverse communities. On the other hand, the extent of support that WFT-T was able to provide was limited to the resources that were available to the Fund.

WFT-T also demonstrated the importance of responding to the crisis of the pandemic in a context of political denialism. For WFT-T, this was possible due to movement-building work done by the Fund, prior to the pandemic, which allowed it to listen to and assess from diverse constituencies of women's rights actors what their lived realities were. WFT-T had already established the mechanisms for engaging smaller, larger, urban, as well as rural-based women's rights actors in previous processes, and was able to utilise this to understand how best to respond to immediate needs, while not losing ground on the broader agenda of sustaining women's rights. In turn, WFT-T worked in close collaboration with donors to negotiate grantmaking agreements that were responsive to emergent needs, particularly during a crisis. As noted by the Fund, not all donors were responsive to such negotiations at the outset, but due to the relationship that WFT-T had with them, the ongoing conversations meant that the Fund achieved some successes in this regard.

WFT-T also worked closely with a range of actors within civil society to share relevant information related to the pandemic with partners, and also to connect those actors and partners to existing responses to COVID-19. This was particularly important given the high levels of violence stemming from the impact of physical isolation and victimisation. Once again, the existing relationships that the Fund had with a broad range of civil society partners assisted it in making timeous responses in a context of "non-responsiveness" by government. In reflection, WFT-T noted that what was most important during this period was to be willing to adjust strategies to make them more responsive to the moment. Navigating different types of relationships and alliances was critical, and not without its challenges. However, at the end of the day, the priority given to seeking out allies that were willing to go against government positions assisted WFT-T (and its allies) to respond to the emergent (and urgent) needs expressed by different communities during the crisis. WFT-T's commitment to an intersectional agenda enabled it to remain true to the need to support different movements and actors across several sectors to address challenges facing women, girls, and other marginalised communities collectively.

While WFT-T has always remained committed to breaking down silos in its grantmaking approach by resourcing organisations working to address the multiple challenges faced by women, girls, and gender-diverse populations, the Fund also acknowledged that, due to the urgency of responding quickly to needs expressed by groups, in reality, groups that were less established, or that did not have the

infrastructure to implement quickly, were less likely to receive funding during COVID-19. Outside of the pandemic, the Fund would accompany such groups and support them to be in a position to receive funding and implement their strategies. Due to the urgency of required responses and limited resources, the Fund thus had to prioritise those groups that were in a position to reach groups that were at greater risk and be able to successfully implement their activities. As such, COVID-19 has highlighted the need for the Fund to continue building the capacities of smaller, informal groups or initiatives so that those groups would also be able to directly receive funding support in future. Due to this challenge, the Fund has indicated that the coverage of funding for COVID-19 is not likely to have achieved the outcomes of supporting the most diverse range of agendas and strategies that might be possible in the national context.

WFT-T's work during COVID-19 pandemic is an important story to tell about the role of a national fund during a global crisis. In the context of current funding of women's rights agendas, the grantmaking budgets of national women's funds are comparatively small (OECD, 2016). Notwithstanding their budget size, as demonstrated by WFT-T, they are able to reach and support different actors to respond to and effect change at multiple levels within the Tanzanian context.

For WFT-T, COVID-19 provides a compelling case for funders to localise responses by prioritising the expertise of women, girls, communities, and local organisations. As noted by WFT-T, a lesson learnt from their COVID-19 experience is that women's funds have to continue doing work to collectively influence donors to "decolonise" their funding approaches for greater results at the local levels, especially during pandemic contexts. In other words, women's funds must continue making the case for bi- and multi-lateral donors to support and resource them as a mechanism to shift resources and decision-making to actors rooted in a national context, thus ensuring that responses are local and contextualised.

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