



SUMMARY REPORT

FEMINIST RESILIENCE AND INNOVATION IN A PANDEMIC

Lessons from the Comic Relief

● Power Up cohort

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POWER UP

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POWER UP GROUPS, PROPOSAL TITLES & ACRONYMS

Astraea – Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice: ‘Online and in the Streets: Powering Up South Asian LGBTQI Women’s Movements’

CREA – Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (with three partners): ‘All Women Count: Rethink power/reimagine agendas/reboot strategies in the feminist movement in India’

EVAW – End Violence against Women Coalition: ‘Could Do Better: Pushing for a whole school approach to girls’ safety and equality’

Fawcett Society (a consortium of seven partners): ‘Equal Power’

FRIDA – The Young Feminist Fund: ‘Shaking the Ground; Colouring the Sky: Strengthening LGBTQI Movements in Sub Saharan Africa’

- **WHER** – Women’s Health & Equal Rights Initiative

IWGIA – International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (with three partners): ‘Empowering indigenous women in Africa and Asia’

Leeds Women’s Aid (a consortium of 10 partners): ‘**Women’s Lives Leeds** (WLL) Voices’

PWC – Pastoral Women’s Council: ‘Empower - Embracing Pastoralists who Organise for Women’s Empowerment and Rights’

- **MWEDO** – Maasai Women Development Organisation

Sappho for Equality; Point of View

UHAI-EASHRI – East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative: ‘Powering Up Sex Worker organising for Human Rights’

- **RUF** – Red Umbrella Fund

UAF-A – Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Rights – Africa: ‘Strengthening women’s rights organising resistance and resilience’

Vidyanikethan (a consortium of six partners): ‘Nurturing Movement of Girls and Young Women as Agents of Change to Ascertain their Rights’

WIEGO – Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising: ‘Empowering Women Home-based Workers’

HNSA – HomeNet South Asia Trust

Womankind Worldwide: ‘Collective Action to Realise Equality (CARE): Feminist movement building in Zimbabwe’

- **WCoZ** – Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe
- **WIPSU** – Women in Politics Support Unit

WRW – Women for Refugee Women: ‘Refugee Women – Empower and Change’

- **RWC** – Refugee Women Connect

WIP – Women in Prison: ‘Power Up: Building the Women’s Centre Movement’

WoMin, African Gender and Extractives Alliance: ‘African women’s voice, African women’s development sovereignty: the right to say no’

- **CNRG** – Centre for Natural Resource Governance
- **Kebetkache** Women Development and Resource Centre

YWT – Young Women’s Trust: Power Up

This report describes themes identified by the 17 Power Up grantees and their partners, based on analysis of all of their annual reports and interviews with all but one of them. It also identifies possible areas for continued sharing and learning among groups as part of the Power Up peer learning process. Key themes are summarised here.

SHIFTS IN CONTEXT

Reports by Power Up groups at end of year one of Comic Relief's Power Up initiative named the major challenges of Covid and lockdown. These related not only to organisational communication and engagement with community constituencies, but to livelihoods of constituents, their exclusion from state and other social supports, and the well documented increase in gender-based violence. Many shifted their advocacy focus to addressing these, as well as taking action to address immediate livelihood and communication needs of constituents. By end of year two of Power Up, some of the continuing consequences of Covid on staff of Power Up groups included stress from personal losses and illness, loss of sociability, pressure of working while doing child education and family care, among other things. In addition, their constituents, too, were living in this context of continuing

uncertainty, fear, and stress, and for some, loss of livelihoods and vulnerability to gender-based violence.

In terms of political space, while a few managed to leverage the situation to draw more attention to their issue – for example gender-based violence – or to the constituency's further marginalisation because of lockdowns, in more cases they described closing of political space for organising and activism. For the Power Up groups, harassment and violence against, among others, sex workers, women opposing extractive industries, and LBTQI persons, escalated. A number of groups, and / or their constituents, faced arrests for protesting. In addition, in India, Zimbabwe and Kenya, groups had to address increased controls over, or surveillance of, those accepting foreign funding.

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND SECURITY

One of the most significant consequences of the lockdowns has been how groups have developed their own capacities for working online, organising information online, organising and communicating with their constituents and those they aim to influence, telephonically or online. In some contexts, they have also had to address the security risks to individuals and organisations of surveillance by the state or others, or of abuse by opposition individuals or groups.

Many groups reorganised their resources in order to be able to equip, at minimum, the leaders of the community or constituency groups they work with, with phones and data, and in some cases with iPads or computers.

All offered training in how to use WhatsApp or Zoom or whatever was their main platform; some brought in specialist trainers or directed constituents to available online training.

Eleven groups have changed the platforms they use, in some cases for effectiveness, in some cases for security. All note the tremendous amount of time required to build constituents' ability to utilise these; and in one case the grantee closed office for two weeks while it changed all of its internal and external platforms. In different contexts, constraints of access manifest differently as do solutions.

In one context constituents do not have smart phones, so phone calls have been the primary

means of communication, while community leaders have been issued smart phones and are using SMS to send in information and to chat. In other contexts, constituents have been issued with iPads or computers in order to manage their own lives and be able to actively engage and advocate. Two groups described being infiltrated. In one case, where a phone is shared in the family, a (man) family member joined a Zoom meeting and privately chatted with girls; in another, a Zoom call was hacked. In both cases the groups took action and increased their preventive approaches.

Significantly, thirteen groups indicated that this crisis response had strengthened their relationships with constituents in some ways. In many cases they had instituted more frequent calls or check-in meetings. In many cases they were able to invite into their processes people who were geographically dispersed. In some cases the ability to advocate to decision-makers online gave those not in the capital a level of access they did not have before.

COVID ADAPTATIONS THAT GROUPS ARE LIKELY TO CONTINUE

Groups identified a range of adaptations they are likely to continue, including:

Sustaining digital capacity and actions:

- o closer contact between partners and with constituents;
- o building into budgets and workplans constituents' access to equipment and data and training them in using it;
- o enabling constituents faster access to knowledge and other supports through use of trainer-training processes;
- o disseminating information online, including through videos, comics and podcasts;
- o supporting constituents to use their power by advocating online.

Including emergency and dire needs as part of the organisation's work, recognising that at times even for an advocacy group, this kind of support is essential. Funders in the cohort are also adding emergency needs into their standard offerings.

Greater attention to **collective care and wellbeing.**

Shifting organisational policies and practices to address staff needs, among other things:

- o increasing the frequency of team and all-staff meetings as well as one-on-one meetings;
- o providing allowances or other supports for mental health or self-care;
- o holding each other accountable for their own self-care and establishing mechanisms for staff to pick up from each other so that days off are really days off;
- o shifting to four or four and a half day week.

THEMES ON MOVEMENT LEARNING AND MOVEMENT BUILDING

This section describes some of the themes present across the annual reports and interviews with grantees and their partners, beyond adaptations to Covid, although frequently they are interlinked.

History, trust and ownership

Most groups emphasised how the building of movements is a slow process premised on building trust among partners, and between grantees and their constituents. Part of the process of relationship-building is ensuring that partners and constituents are genuinely leading the analysis of the terrain, development of strategies, and assessment of if and how well their efforts are working, and if and how to shift strategies. Hence in the early phases of partnership development, intended outcomes relate to that process more than to any influence they may have on external stakeholders or decision-makers.

Building confidence to take action

Groups note that working on highly contentious issues, means putting substantial time into building women's knowledge of their rights, and confidence to challenge those with power.

Using research to enable participation and shape strategy

Thirteen out of 17 groups' annual reports described undertaking and then using research findings to shape strategy. In some cases groups involve constituents in the process, including through peer and participatory research processes. They described using the research to understand the context, constituent needs, as well as to shape messaging and campaigns for social change.

Some described research to challenge or reshape current conceptualisations, for example:

- WoMin African Gender and Extractives Alliance is developing a methodology and tools for designing an ecofeminist cost benefit analysis (CBA) of large-scale development projects to challenge the limited current framing of cost-benefit analysis.
- Urgent Action Fund for Women's Rights – Africa (UAF-A) is engaging feminist activists, healers and academics on communal, ancestral and feminist forms of collective healing practices in order to conceptualise 'healing justice' and how to programme to promote 'healing justice' in a pan-African context.

A few groups described research and engagement to strengthen feminist policy and practice in their own organisations.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Keeping a close eye on what is working and what is not working in the shifting context of the last year has been critical for most groups.

- CARE (Womankind Worldwide with Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) and Women in Politics Support Unit (WIPSU)) implemented an 'advocacy tracker' that records the priorities for advocacy from grassroots women, the actions they have taken and the impact/results of the actions.
- WRW (Women for Refugee Women) and RWC (Refugee Women Connect) commissioned a participatory evaluation. Using the Power Framework (from my Power Up Year 1 report¹), constituents reflected on individual power, building a movement, narrative power and institutional power so that as those the

¹ [How has work funded by Comic Relief's Power Up Programme contributed to shift in women and girls' power?](#)

organisations seek to benefit, they could assess the progress of the project. This has formed the basis from which they will participate in shaping the work going forward.

- Vidyantikethan consortium described both a routine monthly process of data gathering and analysis to identify outcomes as well as training needs; and that each month each regional secretariat shares at least one success story to inspire movement leaders in other regions.
- Leeds Women's Aid described how the Women's Lives Leeds Consortium tested the contracting of an external developmental evaluator and found it so helpful that they plan to build this into all future proposals.

Some groups described having regular reflections, building it into their institutional fabric through weekly meetings in some cases, and / or mid-term and end-of-year processes. Others have carved out retreats in order to deepen collective reflection on the shifting context, its impacts on staff and on their organisations and constituents, and the implications for action. Many also describe creating space for engagement among staff and with partners when specific issues arise. A few groups indicated they are currently rethinking their approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning.

Despite this, there's a general consensus that people tend to be busy and somehow monitoring and reflection time isn't adequately resourced or planned. In addition, challenges in virtual communications at times make it difficult at a distance to gather information or to understand the nuances of dynamics. Organisations are living this tension and doing the best they can within it.

Centring participation

Many groups describe constituent participation as being core to the mode of work. Some of the groups emphasise that in their experience intentional listening can shift the organisation's understanding of its constituents as people, and therefore shift organisational strategies.

In some cases Covid required the organising work to move closer to the grassroots level where community leaders could still connect to constituents despite barriers in digital literacy. Hence the decision and process of groups deliberately shifting power from their NGOs to those 'with lived experience' / 'in communities' came up repeatedly.

One observed that decision-makers were more responsive to direct advocacy by constituents than to advocacy by the grantee's staff.

Participation as core to feminist governance

Thirteen Power Up groups explicitly engage their constituents to shape their strategy development. For example,

- Pastoral Women's Council's (PWC) 34 Women Rights and Leadership Forums (WRLFs) meet twice each month, organising district-level women gatherings; "Olturur Loo Ndomonok", to deliberate their issues.
- Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and organising' (WIEGO) and HomeNet South Asia Trust (HNSA) described how "Thirty-six home-based worker (HBW) organisations from 20 countries became the founding members of the global network representing more than 600 000 HBWs. Over 300 people attended the virtual launch and first Congress with 14 different languages interpreted. The Congress took over five hours with 14 different languages interpreted. Thirty-six affiliates across regions adopted the Constitution, presented regional reports, appointed a Working Committee, confirmed the international coordinator, and adopted an interim logo within this record time."
- Young Women's Trust (YWT) noted, "We implemented a new campaign planning process which positioned 18 young women at the heart of the decision-making process. Through a series of online workshops, they helped us decide what our policy asks should be for the current phase of our

#NoYoungWomanLeftBehind campaign and presented these to policymakers at a stakeholder event in Feb2021 for feedback. Once agreed, they then helped us decide the campaign actions and communications...”

Fostering alliances and partnerships

Insights on partnering in shaping and implementing the Comic Relief proposal

Reflecting on the process of operationalising partnerships where groups together bid for a Power Up grant, many groups noted that where they had not worked together before, or had not worked together on the issues in the Power Up proposal, they needed time after receiving the grant to focus on building the partnership. A few indicated that they had jumped into the work without doing the partnership development that was needed which caused difficulties later that they had to address. The key lessons is the need to set the terms of the partnership right at the start. Also that routine communications are essential, but not always easy to sustain.

Duplication and competition

There’s general recognition that the greater the range of groups committing to collective agenda-setting and action, the greater the chance of influencing public and political action. However, the barriers are enormous. Groups are often in competition with each other, for funds or recognition. It requires a significant investment of resources and time to build relationships of trust that enable collaboration.

- The Women’s Health and Equal Rights Initiative (WHER) described the significant challenge of poor and disorganised networking which causes duplicated efforts and conflicting strategies. In the context of this project, WHER continued to work to close this gap by bringing groups together to connect, learn, and strategise on ways forward in addressing their shared challenges.
- Womankind is developing a set of principles to guide partnerships.

The political moment – context – can spur collaboration, so timing is critical

Both the depth of the crisis precipitated by lockdown – in terms of vulnerability of livelihoods and to gender-based violence – and the desire to create a powerful voice for change, spurred some partnerships that had been nascent before Covid.

- The End Violence against Women Coalition (EVAW) described how 20 representatives across the women and girls and ending violence against women and girls sector came together in this period with a refreshed energy for building an alliance to speak to government with a unified voice as The Prevention Network.
- A number of groups working in South Asia noted their organisations had managed to broaden cross-movement and intersectional discourse on LGBTQI inclusion, in part by drawing attention to how the crisis was increasing dangers of violence faced by LGBTQI people, and getting other groups to include this in their focus on gender-based violence.

Building capacity for inclusion and intersectional action

Many of the Power Up groups are engaged in messaging and alliance-building and influencing other movements, for example to influence the women’s movement to stand in solidarity on LGBTQI or sex worker or refugee issues. The impact of the anti-racism movement, particularly on groups in the UK, is evident in the annual reports. A number of groups described seriously reflecting on their own internal representation, understandings and strategies.

- Fawcett Society organised a series of anti-oppression training for the Steering Group on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred, antisemitism, homophobia and transphobia and anti-Black racism.
- YWT initiated an equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) review which consisted of an audit phase, a learning phase and is now moving into an action planning phase out of which is has shifted its approach to recruitment.
- The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) developed a new gender strategy to define its work and

priority on gender issues for the next 5 years. The main goal of the gender strategy is to address the racial discrimination and violence that Indigenous women face, and thus the project is very much contributing to achieving their visions for supporting indigenous women.

Language justice

Language injustice was a theme raised by many groups. In some cases groups focused on questions of disability. Organisations are ensuring their website and social media are more accessible, for example,

- Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA)'s social media using captions for everything the organisation posts and shifting from English to local language conversations on feminist

FUNDING MOVEMENTS

Trust-based accountability by funders providing continuous, flexible core support

Grantees expressed appreciation for Comic Relief's trust in them, and willingness to let them reshape their direction in response to the Covid crisis. Most notably they indicated that without this flexibility they would not have been able to transition to digital organising. They expressed the hope that their funders who had demonstrated this kind of approach, including Comic Relief, would continue with it going forward, as unrestricted funding enables shifting of strategies as the context shifts as well as respect for community priorities.

Funders supported as grantees of the Power Up initiative similarly note that their

leadership and how Covid had affected people; with sign language interpretation.

- UHAI East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative (UHAI-EASHRI) found that as sex workers began organising in rural areas, they had "to think about language justice – people mostly speak vernacular in rural areas so how do we sustain that momentum of and support communities to create those safe spaces."
- A number of funders have ensured that applicants can apply online in multiple languages, for example in the case of Red Umbrella Fund (RUF), in English, French, Russian or Spanish.

approach centres around trusting that their grantees know what is best for them, because they know their context and communities.

- Power Up grantee FRIDA, itself a funder, noted how its own research had demonstrated that such funding, coupled with non-financial supports, supports the strength and evolution of young feminist movements. See <https://www.whattookyousoalong.org/documentary/frida-fund>.

Supporting a diversity of groups, including unregistered groups

Funders supported by Power Up noted the importance of being flexible and able to fund groups in diverse forms.



“Working on highly contentious issues, means putting substantial time into building women’s knowledge of their rights, and confidence to challenge those with power.”

POWER UP PEER LEARNING: POSSIBLE ISSUES TO PURSUE

Groups identified a range of issues they would like to explore further through the Power Up peer learning process. Some of this could be done as part of the build-up towards a final in-person or online conference if the group decides to hold one. Topics are noted as the basis for further consultation and shaping of a 2022 direction.

Governance, power and feminist leadership

– surfacing leadership and accountability principles and exploring issues ranging from co-leadership models, to strengthening leadership of communities and those with lived experience, and what governance systems are appropriate to constituency-led organisations.

- Continuing the theme of **partnerships**, learning from how various partners in Power Up have addressed their challenges.
- **Differences and similarities between Power Up groups: constituency-based organisations, networks and funders** in relation to
 - how they understand and manage their roles as partners, supporters, funders, but also advocates in their own right;
 - how their partners and sub-grantees understand their roles;
 - how they organise their governance and in relation to questions of power and feminist principles.

Supporting women to stand for elections, and then **holding elected representatives accountable** is the focus of Fawcett, WIPSU and CREA and could yield mutual learning as well as insights for others in the cohort.

Community and activist **training programmes**

– what content, methods, curricula, processes are working well?

Inclusion of people with disabilities and generally building intersectional capacity

– how do we crash through disability being a barrier to inclusion in our own organisations and in organising our constituents? Similarly sharing of experiences of **strengthening an intersectional analysis and practice** within organisations and in movement building.

Revisiting digital organising, in particular what we are learning about holding ‘hybrid’ events.

Addressing **shrinking civil space** and better protecting our partners online.

Using what we’ve learnt from lockdown to **support preparedness for other crises**.

Gender based violence and the possibility of collaboration between groups.

Approaches to Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

– continuing the conversation including the ‘doing’ of feminist MEL and learning from changes groups have implemented.