

WESCA

VIRTUAL CONVENING REPORT:

Co-creating a powerful
African feminist future





Gratitude

There are a number of brilliant young feminist organisers from the region (and beyond) who supported the process of co-creating the convening. The agenda co-creation committee, which included grantee partners, advisors and staff members from the convening working group, so beautifully committed to the goal of making the space as inclusive and collaboratively created as possible. To every member of the FRIDA-verse, including staff, advisors, board members, grantee partners, as well as the brilliant consultants who translated, interpreted, facilitated, advised and accompanied us with great passion and care, we thank you. We want to express our deepest appreciation to Dingaan Mithi and Siza Mukwedini, whose written and visual notes of the virtual convening made creating this report a joyful process. Nadia Elboubkri, FRIDA's Chief of Communities and Culture, supervised the regional focal point in coordinating the convening, and did so with trust and transparency. Finally, we want to express our gratitude to YOU, dear reader, for taking the time to explore this report and learn about what young feminist organisers in the region are dreaming about, challenged by, and working towards. We appreciate you.

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*The abbreviation WESCA refers to the geographical area of West, East, Southern and Central Africa.



FRIDA

The Young Feminist Fund

Founded in 2010, FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund is the only youth-led fund focused exclusively on supporting young feminist activism to advance social justice movements and agendas across the globe. We believe in the collective power, expertise, and innovation of young feminist organizers to address root causes and structures of inequality, in order to create lasting change in their communities.






WESCA Convening background

In 2021, FRIDA-The Young Feminist Fund, hosted the first ever West, East, Southern and Central African (WESCA) virtual convening, which brought together over 100 participants including FRIDA grantee partners, board members, FRIDA staff and regional advisors over 3 days. The space was designed as a platform for the co-creation of ideas to strengthen collaboration and learning across the thematic areas of work FRIDA supports in the region. The last regional convening took place in Nairobi, in 2015; and in the years that have passed, the FRIDA community has changed and grown exponentially. Not only has the composition of the organisation evolved, but the number of groups that FRIDA supports as well as the ways that the support manifests in terms of programs and grants offered has also deepened and widened over time. Currently, almost 40% of the grantee partners in the region joined FRIDA in 2020, and whilst they are quickly developing an understanding of the unique FRIDA grantee partner experience, it takes time to develop a deeper sense of belonging and understanding of the FRIDA journey and community. Likewise, given the number of grantee partners in the region and the disproportionate number of staff and advisors based in the region, the process of establishing and maintaining a consistently open and trust-based relationship with each grantee partner is one that takes time. Thus far, meeting grantee partners has been an effective way to connect and share on a deeper level.

Regional convenings happen intermittently at FRIDA; with large budgets, sufficient staff support, multiple consultants and a great deal of time required to support this process, we must necessarily be very intentional about when and how these community gatherings will take place. When the conditions are ripe for organising convenings though, we pay special attention to make every effort to fulfil community needs and make the planning process as inclusive as possible, so that the connections, lessons, energy, and ideas sparked during the convening are strong enough to burn sustainably bright until we all meet again. What these spaces represent is not just a chance for folks in the FRIDAverse to meet and get to know about their respective areas of work, these spaces are opportunities for collective healing, solidarity building, validation, disrupting the funder-grantee power dynamic, and creating feminist friendships.





Our community, by the numbers:

Currently FRIDA supports over 250 grantee partners in 115 countries across the global south, with a full time staff component of 40 people (and growing), 75 advisors and 7 board members.

- 19 grantee partners from East Africa
 - 18 grantee partners from Southern Africa
 - 12 grantees from West Africa
 - 6 grantee partners from Central Africa
 - 12 Regional advisors (Regional advisors play an important role in the different areas of our work at FRIDA, including: facilitating FRIDA's annual participatory grant making processes, supporting regional strategies and accompanying grantee partners in project implementation.)
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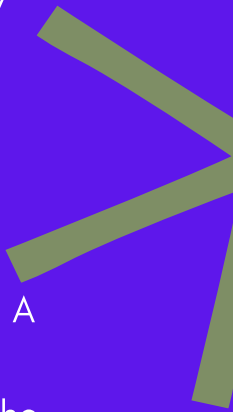
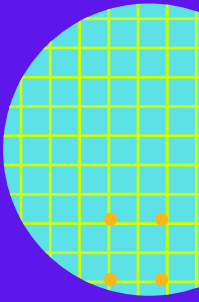
How we co-created the virtual space:

Our commitment to collective care and wellbeing:

The planning of the regional convening was built on the foundation of three organizing principles: transparency, care and accountability. We co-created the agenda by first asking all participants, through a survey, what they wanted to discuss, what kinds of support they would need to be able to be fully present and comfortable, and who they would be comfortable having in the space. We also asked participants if they would like to lead a session and what that might look like. Once that data was collected and analysed, we prioritised securing any access needs and addressing all digital security concerns that participants wrote about, by having follow-up conversations with them about alternative options they would be comfortable with.

To honour our commitment to radical collective care and healing, the agenda co-creation committee agreed to center care as a crucial part of the agenda of the convening, rather than an added extra or after-thought. A care-facilitator was thus hired to support the emotional and healing needs of all participants over the 3 days we spent together, and she led most of the healing sessions that were strategically placed at various points throughout the agenda. The sessions were vital and provided all WESCA convening virtual participants with an opportunity to heal, breathe and feel safe throughout the gathering. We began the convening by observing 2 minutes of silence in meditation and remembrance of all those we've lost, including a founding member of a grantee partner, during the global pandemic.

A few hours before and/or after the convening, participants were given the opportunity to enjoy healing music meditation sessions with the Betina Music Group.



Tech and Care Grants:

Whilst virtual spaces allow for more frequent and less exclusive participation, and undermine the structural obstacles (passports, visas, finances etc) that have historically left many people out of important conversations, we must acknowledge that Zoom fatigue is a real threat to our mental wellbeing. Thus, many of us who were co-organising this convening space advocated for an agenda that highlighted care as a non-negotiable. What blossomed from the seeds of those intentions was a

Tech and Care virtual convening grant awarded to all participants. The tech stipend was awarded to support participants with any technical needs they might have had (laptop repair/replacement, digital security needs, or paying to attend the convening from a local co-working space with strong internet etc). The care stipend was a means of providing resources for any emotional support needs participants had during our 3 days together, including childcare support or access to healing spaces. We recognise that the onus should not only be on participants to ensure that they are prioritising wellness, but that the convening itself should serve as an example of how to think about care as a major part of effective collaboration, rather than a footnote or 'nice extra'.

In addition to hiring two multi-lingual co-facilitators from the region, we hired a third '**care-facilitator**' who led self and collective care sessions during each day of the convening, and was on standby for any emotional support that participants might have required during the convening. For participants who wanted spaces for healing beyond the convening agenda, we hired music healing sessions with a brilliant young healer from the region, who offered group sessions in the mornings and evenings, before and after the convening.








Language accessibility



Arundhati Roy's assertion that "*There is no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard*" aligns with a persistent frustration in multi-national convening spaces in the region, which is that language barriers disproportionately favour anglophone participants, making it challenging for francophone or lusophone participants to feel equally included and valued. Whilst employing translation services for each session is an effective tool for addressing the major language obstacles, it is so much more powerful to think of the possibility of creating a multilingual space that consistently de-centers one particular language over the other and disrupts that power dynamic. In an agenda co-creation meeting, it was decided that there would be main sessions that took place in all three regional working languages (French, Portuguese and English) over the three day convening. This meant that, unless a participant was fluent in all three languages, all participants would have to use translation services. We understood that participants who do not speak English are too often only included in question-asking sessions or break-out rooms; and we wanted to deconstruct that as the norm. This also meant that we committed to a co-facilitated convening that had facilitators who were able to speak in both English and French.



All three languages used in the convening space, as was pointed out by one of the organisers, are colonial, and part of how we decolonise these spaces is by refusing to centralise or privilege participants who happen to have access to the dominant colonial language in global philanthropic spaces. What we committed to working towards was a future convening space that made it possible for indigenous African languages to be used so that we could all show up as our full, authentic selves, or at the very least have the choice in deciding how to engage in these important spaces. Even with language barriers, we found creative ways of disrupting the silos to co-dream; one of the ways we did that was by co-creating a multilingual poem in which each participant would write a line about their vision for an 'African feminist future'. This was a fun way for everyone to work and dream together whilst making equal space for engagement (and we now have a collective, multi-lingual vision of our respective dreams for ourselves and our continent).





Language accessibility

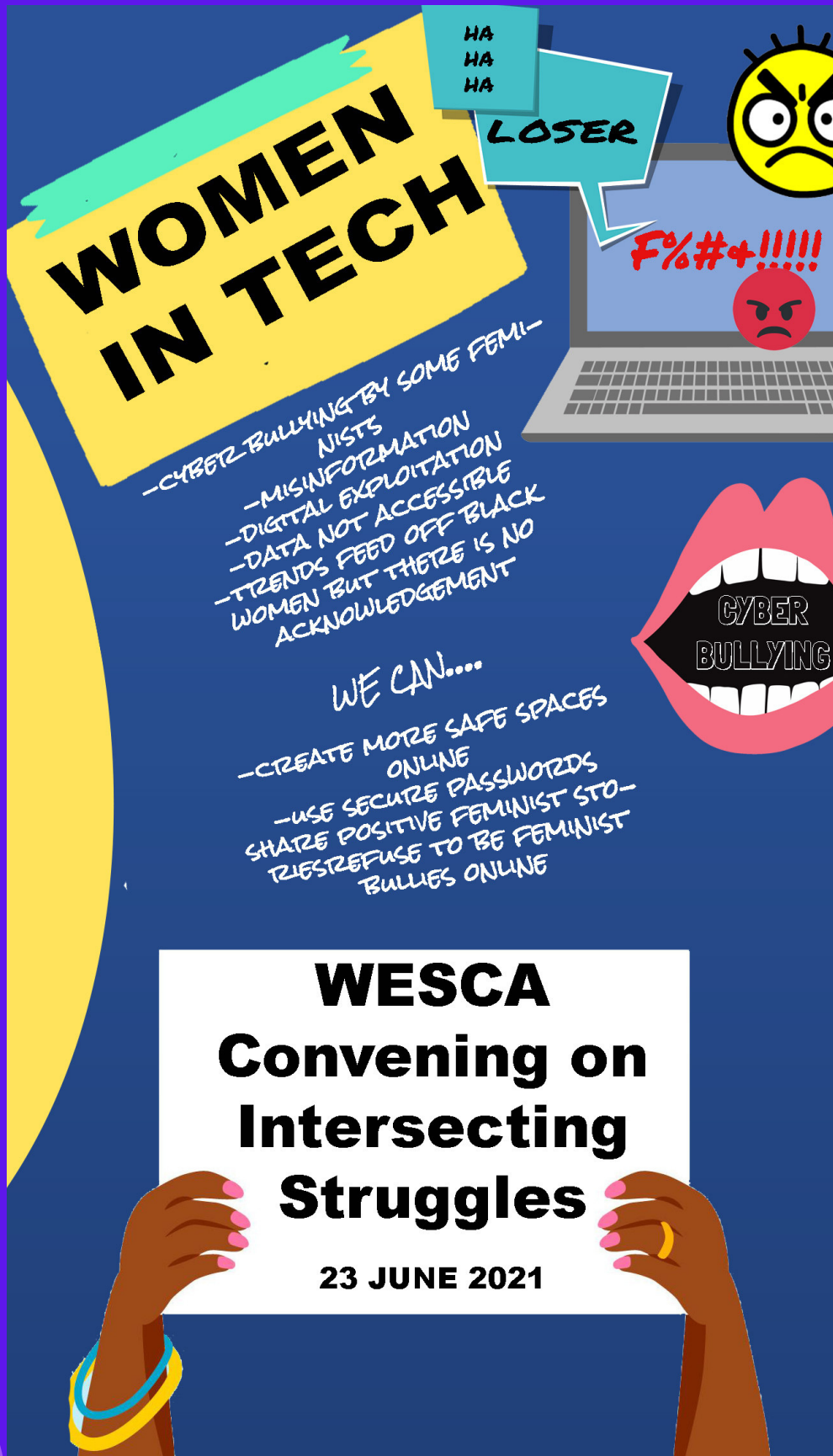
For the first time in FRIDA's organizational history, sign language interpretation was used in a virtual convening. This was a powerful step towards creating more inclusive spaces, particularly in the virtual realm. Organisations, big or small, who commit to prioritising disability rights and access must necessarily take steps to ensure that people living with disabilities are able to enjoy and fully participate in the experiences that able-bodied peers can. In this convening, it was grantee partners themselves who made the recommendations for which sign language interpreters to use, and in doing so were able to approach the space without the anxiety of thinking that some important conversations could get lost in translation. It was also grantee partners, through planning discussions FRIDA had with them, that requested interpreters who were experts in the localised forms of their languages.

As one participant pointed out, *"The Portuguese spoken in Brazil is sometimes different from how we say things here in Mozambique. We need an interpreter who understands our local context and how we use the language here. At other events they usually don't think about that"*. Centering young feminist organisers as experts of their own experiences and not just inviting them to convening spaces, but having them lead the co-creation process of these spaces allows for organisers to learn about the nuances of creating inclusive spaces, and those learnings have longterm positive benefits.



Conscious Conversations:

A visual snapshot of what was said and heard



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A visual snapshot of what was said and heard



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A visual snapshot of what was said and heard

IN TIMES OF COVID

GBV

- SOME WOMEN WERE LOCKED IN WITH THEIR ABUSERS
- FUNDS DWINDLED
- TRAFFICKING & CHILD SLAVERY INCREASED
- POOR HEALTH SYSTEMS
- THE RIGHT TO BE SAFE WAS COMPROMISED
- SAFETY NETS WERE REMOVED

BUT....

- HEALING HAPPENED
- MORE COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTIONS WERE CREATED
- MITIGATION MEASURES FOR FUTURE PANDEMICS WERE SET IN PLACE
- WE DIVERSIFIED
- COMMUNITY WAS MADE STRONGER

HRT

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE FOR LGBTQI COMMUNITY

- SOCIAL TABOO
- SELF HARM WHICH SOMETIMES LED TO DEATH
- NOT THAT MUCH SHARED KNOWLEDGE ON GENDER DYSPHORIA
- GOVERNMENTS ARE SILENT
- IGNORANCE IN HEALTHCARE
- HIGH AND UNAFFORDABLE ECONOMIC COST OF HRT
- FORCED STERILIZATION IN SOME COUNTRIES
- HRT PROVISION NOT SUSTAINABLE FOR DONOR FUNDS








A reflection on the grantee partner experience: WHER Nigeria

On the second day of the Convening, Akudo Oguaghamba (leader of Women's Health and Equal Rights Initiative (WHER)-Nigeria) led a reflective session about the group's journey from when they began as a FRIDA grantee partner in 2013 until now, a few years after having transitioned out of FRIDA. Almost decade that has passed since WHER received their first FRIDA core grant, and since then, the organisation has grown leaps and bounds. Much to the excitement of the convening participants, WHER spoke about the exciting **Power-Up** partnership that they have been leading with FRIDA since 2019, as an example of how it's possible to transition out of the organisation as a grantee partner but continue to work with FRIDA as 'equal partners' in different spaces. Akudo urged the young feminists to be open and to continue asking questions about how FRIDA can best support their work.

"Akudo, how did you manage Akudo to pull through with FRIDA?"

The question was posed by a grantee partner who remarked on the increase in homophobic attacks, specifically towards trans women and girls in West Africa.

"It is very difficult in West Africa to work on feminism and transgender issues, there is a lot of stigma. At that time, we were very young and afraid of a same sex relations bill. We were so much in hiding. The law was passed but that legislation made us bolder" Akudo Oguaghamba



Presentations from FRIDA grantee partners:

Hormonal replacement therapy (HRT)

One of the convening participants from an organization working on Trans rights in Zambia delivered a presentation on hormonal replacement therapy. She noted that legislation in many countries, including Zambia, is archaic and does not accommodate HRT.

Some of the consequences of limited access to HRT include ignorance on the part of healthcare workers, taboos in the society, and huge costs incurred when trying to source HRT products on the market. In most countries in the region, like Zambia, it is extremely difficult to get prescriptions or medical check-ups for HRT clients.

"In Zambia one can't buy HRT medications easily, they are very expensive. It costs between \$50-100 for a small packet of medication. Negative social perceptions are hindering trans women from accessing hormonal therapy. We need a global movement to lobby for easy access of HRT products across Africa" Grantee partner from Zambia



Gender Based Violence and the Impacts of Covid 19 on African feminist work

Gender-based violence was discussed at length during the convening, and there was much reflection on the effect of the global pandemic on women and girls. From Drama Queens Ghana, Aseye Djangmah observed that cases of gender-based violence have been rising due to lock downs, as perpetrators are often closer to their victims for longer periods of time.


In Malawi, cases of GBV are also rising. Titani Magalasi, of an organization called FOCES Malawi, noted that women are facing battery, rape and increased cases of forced marriages and unwanted pregnancies.

Sex workers in Malawi staged a protest in January, 2021 due to loss of business as the national government imposed a curfew limiting the frequenting of bars and night clubs. A rule was put in place that by 8pm all bars should be closed. In Ghana, sex workers were attacked by police due to lock down enforcements, while they struggled to deal with the economic consequences of the government lockdown mandates.

From Mozambique, a FRIDA grantee called Saber Nascier delivered a stunning presentation about **obstetric violence**, defined as a form of maternal health-based violence that is common in public health facilities, homes and other institutions.

Saber Nascier's officer, Camilla, explained to the convening participants that in Mozambique, pregnant women seeking health care in facilities often get yelled at by healthcare workers and experience physical violence especially when getting labor medical procedures without adequate anaesthetics. In some cases, women in maternity wards have reported undergoing Cesarean sections without anaesthetics.

Obstetric violence undermines the bodily autonomy of a woman, and subjects her to psychological torture and economic violence. In some cases, women are forced to bribe health personnel to access medical care. In Malawi, Cameroon and Ghana it was noted that some women who have delivered at health care facilities are detained for failure to settle hospital bills.



Climate smart agriculture and climate justice

Participants in the FRIDA convening discussed the challenges African women are facing due to climate change, which is causing food insecurity and putting the lives of women and children at risk due to hunger and starvation. For instance, Madagascar is facing one of the worst droughts in over 20 years, and the World Food Program (WFP) has called for urgent food aid to avert famine. In Malawi, one of the FRIDA grantee partners, Green Girls Platform (GGP) shared knowledge about climate smart agriculture as a tool to increase food production output. They believe that, in some contexts in the region, climate smart agriculture is vital to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve soil and land productivity.

“We need to look at new technologies and tools to boost agriculture. Herders of cattle are struggling to graze their cattle, even fish in lakes and rivers are struggling to survive due to increased salinity of the water” Joy Munthali, director for Green Girls Platform, Malawi

From Uganda, another FRIDA grantee, the Kaiso Women's Group, is implementing climate smart agriculture innovations. They shared about how they're using bag/sack gardens as a vertical farming technique to increase productivity in a small piece of land.



Digital rights and technology for African women

During the convening, digital rights for women also took center stage. Due to the increase of various social media platforms and access to the internet in the WESCA region, many young women are suffering due to cyberbullying and digital security threats. There is an increase in misinformation, digital exploitation and cyber bullying. Another key challenge noted was that, unfortunately, many African feminists are afraid to utilize the cyber spaces that could be powerful tools for community building, due to abuse and bullying. Creating safer cyber spaces, secure email systems and other tech support systems online were noted to be critical to improving the participation of African feminists on virtual platforms where dialogue on vital women's issues takes place.

Self-care for FRIDA grantees and African feminists

One of the FRIDA grantees, Making a Difference Sisters (MAD) led a discussion on self-care, which they defined as "a way of caring for the body and soul at a low cost". The group said that self care strategies range from beauty, skin care, psychological well-being, eating habits, laughter, communicating openly on needs, taking action on issues, recreation and not forgetting empathy which is a bedrock of self-care.

The participants gave positive feedback, noting the need for self-care in order to build a sustainable African feminist movement.



What Grantee Partners in the region want:

More knowledge-sharing opportunities:

In the WESCA convening, the last day was packed with ideas for improving learning and knowledge on thematic issues such as menstrual hygiene, food security, digital rights, ending sexual violence and improving sexual reproductive health support. A collective need was expressed for FRIDA grantees to more regularly engage and share ideas, as well as co-create and learn from strategies across thematic areas of work, for greater impact.

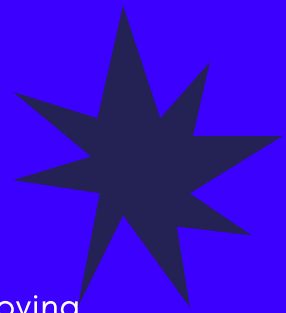
Due to the global pandemic, virtual meetings were seen as an effective solution for knowledge-sharing, based on the success of the WESCA virtual convening.

Sustainable resource mobilization and donor engagement:

During the convening, most groups agreed that there was an urgent need for stronger support systems when it comes to resource mobilization in the region. FRIDA staff noted that funding limitations are a huge challenge, and that FRIDA's grantee partner journey timeline (although sometimes a challenge for groups who need more long-term support) makes it possible to fund new groups in the region every grant making cycle. Dwindling and more stringent donor funding in the region, according to grantee partners, is a threat to the survival of feminist organizations.

Improved grant making processes:

Grantee partners expressed gratitude for FRIDA's consistent attempts to make reporting processes less onerous. Groups discussed how they wished more donors would take this approach, as reporting can be an anxiety producing activity for newly established, youth-led organisations. They highlighted 'flexibility' as the key to success in their FRIDA journeys.



Reflect on common struggles and share brief strategies used in different organizing contexts

"It is one thing to have the skills to advocate and it's another thing to have the courage to persist in the struggle"

Common Struggles

- Stigmatization is one of the cross-cutting issues that affects young feminists organizing across different contexts
- Women's issues aren't prioritized when it comes to budget allocation, resulting in less access to services
- Deprioritization of women's issues
- Intersections between climate justice and girls activism
- Access (to education, healthcare, services, etc)
- Discrimination and marginalization
- Generational gap & Intergenerational divide between established and emerging activists and women's organisations
- Misinformation
- Misconceptions about feminism and feminists leading to negative perceptions on feminist organizing
- Limited cooperation and coordination among feminist organisations; collective organising and action especially among feminist activists and organisations, efforts are scattered;

Reflect on common struggles and share brief strategies used in different organizing contexts

- Limited capacity in feminist analysis and approaches; traditional charity approaches are not working to address deep rooted negative social norms, and systemic structural and patriarchal barriers to women's rights;
- Long and costly processes of registration which affects the capacity of young initiatives to mobilise funding and deliver on their work

Strategies used

- A true intersectional perspective requires a deep analysis of the past to unlearn some of the perspectives we still carry to this day
- Leverage our strengths to come together
- Raising awareness around women's rights and our struggles
- Meet with parents to consolidate the information being shared with girls and not "dilute" the work of awareness raising
- The use of community radio stations to counter COVID-19 impacts
- The creation of informal discussion spaces including safe spaces for feminists to share and strategize, to improve their analytical skills and gain strength from each other

A peak into break-out rooms: Notes on the intersections of young feminist organizing struggles.

CHALLENGES

Burnout when working in very challenging contexts

- Wars and harsh society. Yet, we still continue to work.
- We have personal trauma that we have to relive. Thus, we are so grateful for the Capacity Strengthening grants that can now be used for healing.
- There are a lot of misunderstandings about what intersex means. This creates challenges for our movement's work. Some people make assumptions about intersex groups' needs and challenges in relation to broader LGBTQI movements.
- People are afraid of being part of an invisible activist group.
- We face religious challenges.

Lack of access to resources

- Lack of connection with funders and donors who will support our work.
- We lack resources and find it hard to include women and people of different genders and abilities as a result.
- Some people look at the movement and only think about what benefits they can get. They're not really interested in supporting our work.

Lack of flexibility and difficult application processes

- Funding applications forms are too complicated
- When you inform funders that something has changed, some of them are not flexible and can't change their budgets. When we deal with urgent situations, funders don't allow us to add new items on the budget to do so.
- Connecting with too many organizations, which makes it harder to see what growth and success are actually like. Funders' reporting and MEL system can impact how we see our own work.

Lack of capacity

- Based on volunteer work
- Most people have full time jobs and it's hard to fully support the collectives' work in the movement
- Hard to keep up with constantly training (and changing) volunteers

Lack of support system for collaborations

- Some donors' funding structures "encourage" activists to compete
- Some groups who are good at applications always get more funding.

Hyper globalization of Feminism

- The co-optation of feminist messages. Our movement messages become a trend instead of movement work. Opportunities are being given to people who have more followers.

Strategies

- We look for alternative and diverse funding and economic sustainability outside the traditional funding system.
- We work with some religious leaders who can become our close partners to work on these challenges coming from religions.
- Self-care is an ongoing journey and we remind ourselves to do so while we support survivors everyday.
- Being very careful about who we work with, from the media and funders etc. We need to unite our sisters to work on our issues, otherwise, donors can further divide us. We need to put sisterhood first.
- We should build stronger movements, and work on understanding what we should do as a young feminist organization to strengthen our young feminist movement.

Euphorically dancing our way to a more connected African feminist future:

The WESCA convening concluded in joy and collective groove, with all participants showcasing their moves in an intense dance session on the virtual dancefloor (we're grateful to all those who sent in their song recommendations). At the end of the final day of the convening, FRIDA staff urged all grantee partners to keep networking and collaborating. Post-convening grants were awarded to grantee partners and advisors who successfully submitted proposals to collaborate on a project born out of ideas sparked during the convening. In this way, the conversations and connections can continue long after the 3 days spent together. We're looking forward to many more regional convenings in the near future!

THANK YOU FOR READING!



