Vasantham Pengal Sangam (VPS) is a women-led grassroots organization in Tiruchirappalli, India. Their goal is simple – they want women to earn fair wages and thrive as entrepreneurs. With the long-term support of Women First, they aim to launch a women-owned company that will cut out middlemen and keep money in the hands of the women who are producing goods.

VPS responded to the pandemic immediately, recognizing that women’s livelihoods were affected on a massive scale. With few resources available to the organization, Padma said she felt their effort was like trying to season the ocean with a handful of spices. She turned to Women First for support and guidance.

Through our COVID-19 Emergency Fund, VPS was able to reach 300 of their community’s most at-risk women and their families. With just $4,000 and smart strategies, VPS provided families with critical food aid and ensured that specific needs of women and adolescent girls were not overlooked. They provided sanitary napkins to 400 adolescent girls – for many of these girls, this was the first time they had ever had access to menstrual hygiene materials. Knowing how vulnerable to misinformation about the virus the rural poor would be, VPS also paired their distributions with information on prevention, and included PPE and sanitizer in aid packages. They were diligent about safety and this paid off. They have not seen a single case of COVID-19 among their staff or beneficiaries.

While the most important goal of Women First's emergency support was to protect women and girls, these funds accomplished so much more. VPS gained recognition locally and learned from their response, which has already improved their programs. As they look to an uncertain, but hopeful future, they are investing their 2020 Women First Grant ($10,000) in building a strong foundation for both their organization and the women-owned producers company they intend to launch next year. VPS is an inspiration to us, and we are proud to stand beside them (virtually!) as they lead their community in recovery and build towards greater equity for the women and girls they serve.

The Women First COVID-19 Emergency Fund dispersed $139,193 so far and has had an impact on over 16,000 women, girls and trans people to date.

As the pandemic continues, temporary changes to the way we fund ensures grantee partners can sustain their organizations and respond to critical challenges quickly. Through a 2020-2021 ‘Bridge Year’ (aptly named for its purpose, to create a bridge from crisis to recovery) Women First is awarding $275,000 to current grantee partners. This continuity will be essential to the survival of many organizations and their programs.

Join our webinar on Nov. 11
"Measuring Our Impact"
To register, visit www.womenfirstfund.org/new-events

Nov. 25 - Dec. 10 are 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence
Dec. 1 is #GivingTuesday. Join the global generosity movement.
**FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

We continue to live through challenging times, learning and adapting from day to day. As the world deals with ever-greater personal loss and stress due to COVID-19, we at Women First want to express our mutual support, empathy, and solidarity to our loyal supporters and grantee partners around the world. As I read about our grantees who started making masks as a way to generate an income and protect themselves and their communities, I was reminded of the immense resiliency of women. While a silver lining on the pandemic is hard to identify, this time does offer the opportunity to focus on strategic questions about what we are learning, especially from our grantees. Women First is being proactive and thoughtful about decisions we’re making for our future due to the impact of COVID-19.

With sadness, I share the news of the passing of Virginia Maynard and Bonnie Lincoln. Virginia was the VGIF (as Women First was known then) Board President from 1987 to 1993 and played an invaluable role in the formalization of our organization, laying the groundwork for Women First to increase our impact on women and girls around the world. She also served as a representative to the United Nations for IFUW (now GWI) and shepherded VGIF’s admission to the Economic and Social Council of the UN in the early 90s, along with representing us at the UN through 2008. We also lost Bonnie Lincoln, who was a longtime supporter and active committee member.

As the team and I focus on making rapid decisions to protect our grantees, address donor needs, and communicate with stakeholders, our leadership must also balance oversight of the pandemic response with thinking beyond the immediate challenges. Together with the Board, we will weigh key operational risks, ensure our financial stability, and not lose sight of our organization’s long-term priorities, even as we focus on short-term crisis response. As all of us will need help in unforeseen ways, Women First will provide consistent, trusted guidance to women and girls who desperately need our support.

**BOARD MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: KATHERINE D’URSO**

Please meet Katherine D’Urso, a marketing and communications professional with extensive experience in the financial and legal sectors. Katherine has served on the Board since 2018, serves as Executive Vice President of Women First, and is a valued member of the Development Committee.

**Please tell us a little about your professional outlook.**

I enjoy understanding people’s views and aspirations, and helping them figure out how best to communicate about themselves to a wider audience. I’m naturally curious about how others view the world. I moved a lot as a child (including living in Asia and Africa) and my husband is from Italy. I’m grateful for a life that exposed me to a wide range of cultures – and cuisines! There is nothing like sharing a good meal and good conversation.

**What do you find most compelling about supporting women’s economic empowerment?**

Economic empowerment leads to respect – both self-respect and respect from others – as well as the freedom to make choices. As women become empowered, their families and their communities benefit, too. Economic empowerment and political empowerment are mutually reinforcing, meaning that women’s economic empowerment can help ensure women’s voices are heard and felt more broadly. The Women First emphasis on funding grantees’ own ideas really resonates with me. Women know what they need and what will make a difference in their communities.

**What are you most excited about for the future of Women First?**

Our multi-year, flexible-funding model. Partnering with our grantees and seeing their strengths increase is so inspiring! I love to garden, and I believe that strong communities, like gardens, take years to grow properly. Right now, I am impressed by our grantees’ resilience as they work through the coronavirus pandemic. I see how they are adapting and surviving, and that we can pull together to weather this crisis in order to get back to other priorities as soon as possible.

---

Women First grantees live and work in some of the most difficult environments on earth — crowded urban slums, refugee settlements, remote mountainous villages — communities where COVID-19 is only one of many life-threatening issues. And historically, less than 2% of global charitable aid ever reaches these grassroots groups. That is why support from our Emergency Funding is so desperately needed - Women First acts as a literal lifeline at times like this.

You can help Women First continue to be a lifeline to our grantee partners and the women, girls, and trans people they reach. Make a donation today by visiting [www.womenfirstfund.org/donate](http://www.womenfirstfund.org/donate). All donations are fully tax-deductible by United States Federal Law. EIN: 23-7068080.