A year has passed since COVID-19 took hold, but as spring arrives in the US, the determination of our grantee partners continues to inspire us.

CWEN is a hub for women entrepreneurs in Kampala, Uganda, and for their small enterprise partners, COVID-19 was catastrophic. Estimates suggest that during the first month of the pandemic, informal workers globally lost an average of 60% of their income. In Uganda, prices of raw materials and packaging doubled or tripled nearly overnight. This impact was compounded by challenges women already face in accessing finance, markets, information, and digital technology.

As a community-based organization, CWEN had a perfect vantage from which to spot opportunity – and they did. Because of lockdowns, families had to rely on products available locally in their communities, creating a space in the market for products women entrepreneurs were already making. With an emergency grant from Women First, CWEN supported ten women to stay in business, distributing capital to purchase the raw materials and packaging needed to produce local food baskets and the marketing tools to improve their sales. This is how women thrive – by working together.

We invite you to learn more about CWEN and the women entrepreneurs they are empowering by visiting our blog, available on our website: www.womenfirstfund.org.

UNITED NATIONS CSW65

Women First attended the 65th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) from March 15-26, 2021. The virtual format enabled us to include a delegation that truly represents our organization – one made up of community-based grantee partners from East Africa and India, as well as staff, board, and committee members. Val from grantee partner MAD Sisters shared this inspiring note about her experience: “The CSW65 sessions were such an eye-opener for me and the lessons I learned will be shared with my team at MAD Sisters. I was challenged to be a bold feminist even as the globe fights COVID-19. We should take it upon ourselves to go back to better and not to normalcy. I also learnt that the representation of women that we fight for will be possible if we stand up and take the spaces ourselves, that no decision should be made about us without us!”
Dr. Esther Ngumbi joined our Board in 2018, and is an active member of the Grants and Learning and Governance and Board Development Committees. Esther is an Assistant Professor in the Entomology and African American Departments at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She is also the 2021 recipient of the prestigious 2021 Mani L. Bhaumik Award for Public Engagement with Science from the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Esther is originally from Kenya’s coastal Kwale County. She grew up in a rural community where she learned the importance of hard work, by collecting water and firewood and helping on her family’s farm. Through this she gained an appreciation for the little things in life... things money cannot buy.

Esther is thankful for the many mentors she had that tapped into her curiosity, intelligence, and drive and pushed her to find solutions to issues that affected rural families like hers. She received a scholarship to study for her PhD at Auburn University, in Alabama. Her research and scientific pursuits at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign have been internationally recognized and awarded.

Esther is proud to be a Women First Board member because, “we give women power by investing in them and opening up a world of opportunity that would otherwise be unattainable”. Esther is especially proud of Women First’s new six-year partnership model, which shows our understanding that change doesn’t happen overnight and that we are committed to our grantee partners’ long-term success. Esther’s passion for women and girls traces back to her childhood in Kenya. Esther saw women like her mother not receiving the appreciation they earned and deserved. She knew that if all women were given equal resources and opportunities – they could accomplish anything.

We thank Esther for her passion and dedication – she is an inspiration to all of us at Women First!