



# Executive summary

This case study uses the example of Fondo de Mujeres del Sur (FMS) to explore how grants designed to support resilience can strengthen the capacity of women's funds in adapting to challenging contexts and building sustainable impacts. Based in Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay, with 17 years' experience and a regional reach across Latin America, FMS has experienced significant growth in challenging political and social contexts, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the Resilience Grant offered FMS the time and resources needed to be able to reflect on its role in the feminist ecosystem, and adjust its strategies and internal functioning accordingly.

The institutional strengthening process aided by the Resilience Grant allowed FMS to more effectively **adapt to unforeseen circumstances** and respond to the demands of its partners. The implementation of

collective leadership, the creation of an endowment fund, and the adoption of individual and collective care practices exemplify how **internal resilience can translate into a greater capacity to respond**. The fund's enhanced response capacity has improved its relationships with grassroots feminist organizations, leading to bonds of trust, shared learning, and a more equitable model of collaboration.

Here, we highlight the vital role of flexible and sustained funding—as offered by the Resilience Grant—in assisting the survival of women's funds, and also allowing them to strengthen internally and **imagine new ways of working that transcend the limitations of traditional funding mechanisms**. For FMS, the Resilience Grant was a catalyst for it to accelerate key initiatives, providing the momentum needed to make strategic decisions that, without financial backing, tend to take a back seat.

## Introduction

This case study examines the transformative journey taken by Fondo de Mujeres del Sur (FMS) after obtaining a Resilience Grant and participating in collaborative processes promoted by the Fenomenal Funds initiative.

FMS faced the challenge of expanding its support to women's and feminist organizations in light of complex political contexts, financial constraints, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here, we explore how the Resilience Grant aided in strengthening the work of FMS, supporting it in responding to regional challenges and expanding its reach in South America. Four key areas were involved in the fund's evolutionary process:

- 1. Internal strengthening for sustainability:** FMS used resilience-focused funding to establish a collective leadership model, strengthen its governance, and engage in innovative practices to ensure organizational sustainability;

- 2. Practices of care and collective wellbeing:**

FMS prioritized care as a feminist principle, integrating concrete measures to support individual and collective wellbeing in the midst of high work demands and external pressures;

- 3. Geographical expansion and strategic flexibility:**

FMS strengthened its presence in different contexts, enabling its members to respond more effectively to regional challenges and better support grassroots movements;

- 4. Strengthening the impact on partner organizations:**

FMS's institutional strengthening improved its ability to support its partner organizations, subsequently promoting trust and collective learning in feminist movements.

The case study concludes with reflections on the long-term impact of these processes for FMS and its partners.

## A fund that grows despite challenging contexts

FMS is a medium-sized, growing women's fund, with 17 years' experience. It operates in a region marked by increasing restrictions on funding for human rights organizations and regression affecting feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements. South America has seen a rise in far-right governments and the growth and institutionalization of neoconservative and anti-feminist actors, whose policies limit progress on gender equality, restrict civil liberties, and hamper the work of social movements.

Despite this, FMS has achieved exponential and sustained growth and development—not only increasing the number of organizations it supports annually fivefold, but also expanding the number of funds mobilized. In addition to a presence in Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay—priority countries since its foundation—FMS has also provided organizations in Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela with financial and technical-political support for half its institutional life. Further, in coordination with other Latin American women's funds, it supports organizations throughout the region via the 'Leading from the South' initiative. Together, they mobilize more than USD6 million annually, directly funding 238 mostly grassroots organizations with multi-year support (data from 2023).

# Uses and effects of the Resilience Grant

## Strengthening internal capacities to build sustainability

In response to its organizational growth and challenging political and social contexts, FMS used the support of the Resilience Grant to advance its institutional adjustment process. This strengthening primarily involved **a transition to collective management**, which began in 2019 and was able to be consolidated thanks to the financial support received. One FMS member revealed,

*"The resources represented a significant boost at the beginning of the collective management, as they made it easier to cover the costs associated with having three people in management, both in terms of human resources and salaries."*

The collective structure, comprising an executive director and two co-directors with different

responsibilities, made it possible for the fund to divide strategic functions within the leadership—such as resource mobilization, institutional development, and funding implementation—ensuring that each area could advance. This new model also ensured the sustainability of leadership during absences, such as parental leave.

In addition, FMS strengthened its administrative policy and programmatic structures, particularly among its teams in Paraguay and Uruguay. New protocols and strategies were developed across the organization, such as a **care policy and an endowment fund which strengthens the financial sustainability** of FMS.

The combination of participatory leadership and structural adjustments was fundamental to managing FMS's growth in a sustainable way and allowing the fund to better respond to its partners' needs in an increasingly restrictive environment. "Having flexible funds for our internal strengthening meant we could start to identify our needs," noted one member.

## Reconciling productive and reproductive work

*Productive work refers to tasks that generate income or contribute directly to the economy, while reproductive work encompasses unpaid roles that sustain and support family and domestic life. Reconciling these two types of work means creating systems and policies that recognize and support both, ensuring that neither is undervalued or overly burdensome. The aim is to foster a more inclusive and balanced approach to work and family life.*

### Individual and collective care in the face of COVID-19, high labour demands, and state persecution

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted to FMS the inherent tensions between productive and reproductive work, especially for women and feminized individuals, and the lack of progress on achieving good work-life balance, even within feminism.

“At that time, all my fellow mothers were running around with their children,” shared one FMS member. “Each of us was completely exhausted. We felt like the machine didn’t stop, even though the world was in crisis.”

In response, FMS prioritized **care as a cross-cutting theme of its feminist agenda**. In addition to designing its care policy, the fund implemented concrete measures—such as flexible working hours, allowances for mental and physical health, and specific support for pregnant colleagues or those with young children. Facilitating connections between teams in different countries was essential for maintaining organizational cohesion during remote working, and provided space for growing stronger as a collective.

Care-related measures were also implemented by FMS in recognition of the importance of addressing the exhaustion and burnout faced by staff working in high-intensity situations and contexts of state persecution. As one FMS member said:

*“The work we do is driven by so much passion and dedication that we often do not take into account, neither for ourselves nor for our*

*partners, the impact on our energy, the exhaustion and the burnout we experience.”*

Caring went beyond being a principle and became a structural practice that allowed FMS to guarantee the individual and collective wellbeing of its team.

### Consolidating a geographical presence

Diversifying its resource mobilizations geographically was key in FMS’s strategy to overcoming administrative and financial restrictions, especially in increasingly adverse contexts. This approach also had positive financial outcomes: having strong administrative structures in Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina affords FMS **greater flexibility to mobilize funds and creatively respond to the growing demands of its partners**, who face increasing restrictions in their own contexts.

For instance, FMS uses a flexible funding approach to support organizations in more than 20 Latin American countries through the Leading from the South initiative, in close collaboration with other Latin American women’s funds.

An FMS member explained,

*“These organizations are also feeling the impact of the policies imposed by far-right governments, and generally only have access to bilateral or multilateral cooperation funding, which tends to be more rigid.”*



## Enhanced collaboration with partners

The institutional and geographical strengthening of FMS has positively impacted the quantity and quality of support the organization offers its partners.

As one member commented: “When teams are closer to the movements, there is better support, a deeper understanding of the organizations, and a greater knowledge of local idiosyncrasies, culture, and dynamics.”

With the support of the Resilience Grant, FMS reinforced its offices in Paraguay and Uruguay, hiring new staff and developing local capacities. This enabled its members to build greater connections with grassroots organizations, allowing FMS to improve its understanding of their specific needs and contexts, and promote crucial linguistic justice in regions with language diversity.

The learnings generated by FMS in areas such as financial sustainability and resilience were actively shared with its partners, to support them

in developing their own capacities and better adapting to challenging contexts. Collective care practices also promoted by FMS have begun to be implemented by some partners, while others have received specific support to identify measures and be reassured that focusing on care is still possible in dire circumstances.

In addition, the regional meetings with partners organized by FMS are designed with a focus on the wellbeing of the activists and their families, providing inclusive spaces and less saturated agendas that encourage full participation and rest.

These initiatives reflect a more equitable and caring partnership model, encouraging the consolidation of a support network and collective learning. As a whole, these actions led FMS to strengthen the bonds of trust and collaboration with its partners—demonstrating that **a strategic and feminist approach can generate profound and sustainable impacts.**

## Conclusions

While FMS recognizes that the funding received through the Resilience Grant was not large, it noted the grant as being “powerful”. This support made it possible for the organization to identify the changes it needed to make and the strategic decisions it had to take in view of the growth it was experiencing, as well as in relation to the political and health contexts it faced at the time.

Ultimately, the Fenomenal Funds Resilience Grant assisted FMS in enhancing its capacity for adaptation and sustainability, particularly in terms of:

➤ **Strengthened internal capacities**, especially of the work teams and offices in Paraguay and Uruguay. These changes improved the teams’ capacity to respond to the need for mobilization of funds in the region, as well as provide enhanced programmatic and political support to partners in the region;

➤ Increased financial **resilience and sustainability** through the creation of an endowment fund;

➤ Strategic **transformation of its institutional**, governance, and policy structure to adapt to its own growth. This process has enabled the fund to generate more horizontal work processes and better respond to complex political and social contexts;

➤ Fostering **a culture of care**, through the design and implementation of policies and measures focused on comprehensive individual and collective care of the team and the fund’s partners, as well by providing a better work-life balance.

These changes strengthened FMS, allowing it to adapt to a changing environment and improve its relationships with, and impacts on, its partners and the feminist movement in general.

# What are the next steps for FMS?

The flexible funding provided by the Resilience Grant supported FMS in strengthening its internal structure, transforming policies and strategies, and sharing learnings with its partners—boosting its long-term impact and influence on the feminist movement.

Looking ahead, FMC aims to scale these achievements to its partners. To help achieve this, FMS is advocating for longer and more collaborative support processes, whereby its partners also participate in institutional strengthening. This approach would not only amplify the impact of women's funds, but also allow them to dream and plan for the long term.

“When I visit the organizations we support, I always ask: ‘What would you dream of if you could have all the money in the world?’,” shared one FMC member.

*“Someone once said to me, ‘We dream of no longer having to ask for funds in order to survive. How wonderful it would be to have funds to make our dreams come true.’ Fenomenal Funds allowed us to dream and realize some of those dreams. This should be replicated.”*

Now, FMS invites other donors to recognize the value of institutional strengthening and to join its vision of the future—where feminist organizations not only survive, but thrive and continue to transform realities.

# Growing, adapting, and resisting in times of COVID-19 and political uncertainty

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