

Illuminating Impact: Why Gender Matters for Funders in Any Issue Area



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About This Report

In 2021, The Bridgespan Group partnered with [Shake the Table](#) to investigate how funders could better support feminist movements. The resulting report, [Lighting the Way: A Report for Philanthropy on the Power and Promise of Feminist Movements](#), helped funders understand why and how to channel philanthropic dollars into feminist movements. These powerhouses for social change remain a huge and largely untapped opportunity for philanthropy.

With this report, we expand our scope to share practices that can help any funder in any field increasingly consider gender in their grantmaking. Gender-focused work is not just for “gender funders.” It’s for climate funders, education funders, health funders—any funder seeking to speed progress on the issues they care most about.

Over the last year, we interviewed and engaged with more than 80 funders, nonprofit leaders, and experts around the globe, many of whom are actively grappling with how to include gender considerations in their work to achieve better results. As part of that research effort, we facilitated a learning community of over 30 funders across 19 institutions—some relatively early-stage in contemplating gender equity in their grantmaking, and others deeper into the work. Many learning community members have implemented the practices and tactics put forth in this report and have seen progress in their results. The collective aspirations, questions, knowledge, and insights shared with us across that yearlong arc form the bedrock of this report.

Let us also share a few contextual notes about how we explore gender in this publication:

- We focus on women, girls, and gender-expansive peopleⁱ—for which we often use the shorthand “women.”
- We bring an intersectional orientation, meaning we consider gender in concert with other dimensions of identity around which women have historically been marginalized—such as race, caste, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and age. We see this as critical given how forms of discrimination compound one another and lead to worse outcomes.
- We consider gender from a global standpoint. While there is certainly variation in the specific barriers women face across contexts and the language used to describe those barriers, we hope funders across geographies will find this report useful.

ⁱBy “gender-expansive” person, we mean someone with a wider, more flexible range of gender identity, expression, or both than is typically associated with the binary gender system.

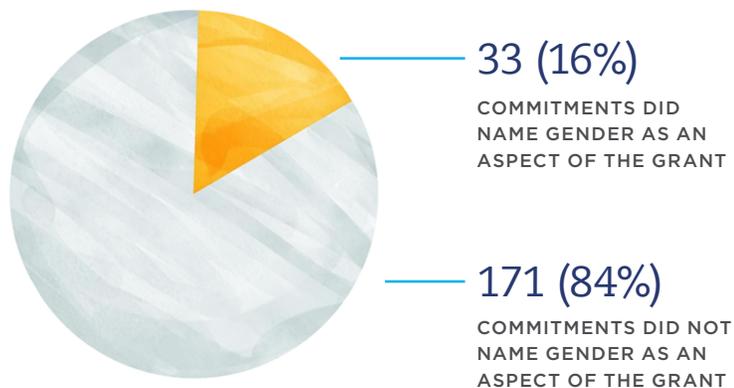
Introduction

When the United Nations ratified the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, gender figured prominently. Gender had its own dedicated goal with SDG 5: “Achieve gender equality.” And, perhaps even more strikingly, gender was mentioned explicitly in 10 of the other SDGs—on issues that ranged from health and work to economic growth and peace and justice.¹

The SDGs’ broad-based focus on gender stands in sharp contrast to prevailing philanthropic practice. Consider that in 2021-2022, US donors made roughly 200 grants of \$25 million or more to social change causes. Just 16 percent named gender as an explicit focus of their grants.²

In a sample of large gifts (\$25M+) made in 2021-22, only **16% named gender** as an explicit aspect of the grant.

Source: Analysis of Bridgespan’s [Philanthropic Big Bets Database](#) (addition of 2021-22 to database forthcoming), drawing on donors’ public communications to determine if grants had a gender focus.



The fact is, many funders don’t consider gender equity when they think about impact. Those who do typically view gender as its own discrete program area—a focus that has been vital for improving the lives of women, girls, and gender-expansive people. Yet time and again, the world shows us gender matters in every issue area. Funders who consider gender in their giving stand to accelerate their progress; those who don’t risk failing to achieve the impact they seek.

Take the **workforce funder** who invests in entrepreneurship.

The funder doesn’t realize bank policies in their target region only allow one account per household, which almost always means a man in the household gets the loan. (In instances when women do get accounts, regulations also sometimes permit men to access them without a woman’s consent, meaning women don’t get full control.) As a result, most women in these areas can’t get loans. Without sufficient capital, women’s businesses—and an entrepreneurship program overall—have limited potential.





Take the livelihoods funder who pours millions of dollars into developing drought-resistant seeds for West Africa.

The funder doesn't consider that women produce an estimated 60 to 80 percent of food in low-income countries,³ and, without explicitly thinking about what will resonate with women farmers, backs marketing efforts that appeal primarily to men. Uptake of the seed is minimal, and as a result, so are associated economic benefits.

Take the health funder who seeks to improve health care outcomes for all.

The funder doesn't consider that women are often excluded from clinical trials, most notably those focusing on cardiovascular disease, cancer, and mental health disorders. With drug efficacy and treatment recommendations being based largely on men, diseases are misdiagnosed and undertreated in women. Meanwhile, health disparities widen.



Or take the environmental funder who wants to stop deforestation in Indigenous territories.

The funder recognizes that, with men moving to cities, women are the frontline defenders. Knowing local governance structures won't allow women to participate politically or own land, the funder channels support to women—to convene, strategize, and organize against powerful mining interests. In this case, mining is slowed and, in some places, halted.



For fundors in every field, the message is clear: to achieve equitable and lasting change, we must pay attention to the on-the-ground realities of how society works, and those realities are shaped profoundly by gender.

If you care about...you'll want to know that

HEALTH CARE

Women spend **25%** more time in poor health relative to men. Addressing this health gap would improve women's lives and boost the global economy by an estimated \$1 trillion each year by 2040 as women participate more fully in the workforce.⁴

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Women produce an estimated **60% to 80%** of food in low-income countries.⁵ Investing in smallholder women farmers can **improve agricultural yields by 30%** and reduce carbon emissions by up to 2 billion tons by 2050.⁶

FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Currently, **20 million people are displaced** by climate change every year,⁷ of whom **80%** are estimated to be women.⁸

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Reducing the earnings gap for Black women (who earn 67 cents per every \$1 paid to white men⁹) **could increase the US annual GDP by as much as 2.1%**—or \$525 billion¹⁰—put directly into the hands of Black women.

LITERACY

Women account for **two-thirds of adults (515 million) globally who are unable to read.**¹¹ According to the World Literacy Foundation, illiteracy costs the global economy about **\$1 trillion annually.**¹²

DEMOCRACY

Women hold only **10%** of political party leadership positions¹³ and only **27% of legislators globally are women.**¹⁴ An increase in the number of female lawmakers can lead to longer periods of peace and reduced levels of conflict.¹⁵

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Women are the fastest-growing population of incarcerated people in the United States.¹⁶ The implications for families nationwide are far-reaching, as roughly **60% of women incarcerated in prisons have children under the age of 18.**¹⁷ Starker still, one in two Black trans women report being incarcerated in their lifetimes.¹⁸

“If you're not having a conversation that includes gender and race and disability, you run the risk that you will miss important pieces of the story and important organizations you need to be resourcing.”

— FATIMA GOSS GRAVES, PRESIDENT AND CEO, [NATIONAL WOMEN'S LAW CENTER](#)

Funders Are Leaving Impact on the Table

Gender—along with gender inequity—permeates every aspect of our lives. It’s hardwired into our homes, communities, schools, and institutions. The rules and biases that govern society have been and continue to be shaped by those in power, mostly men. That gendered reality leads to profound differences in life experiences and outcomes across gender lines—on nearly every issue society faces.

Of course, gender is not a stand-alone human characteristic, but inextricably linked to other aspects of a person’s background and identity. And gender inequity is compounded dramatically when it intersects with racism, casteism, ableism, and other systems of discrimination. When women, girls, and gender-expansive people also face other forms of inequity, they experience the poorest outcomes.

Recognizing the critical role gender plays, philanthropy supports important work focused squarely on women and girls. Consider that donors provided \$8.8 billion in funding to groups serving women and girls in the United States in 2020. But, while this is a significant sum, it represented only 1.8 percent of total charitable giving that year.¹⁹ And there is even less funding for women who face other forms of inequity. For example, globally, funding for Black women, girls, and trans people is a much smaller piece of the pie, amounting to just 0.1 to 0.35 percent of foundation giving in 2018.²⁰ These proportions pale in comparison to the scope of the opportunity, given how few issues are untouched by the gendered nature of society.

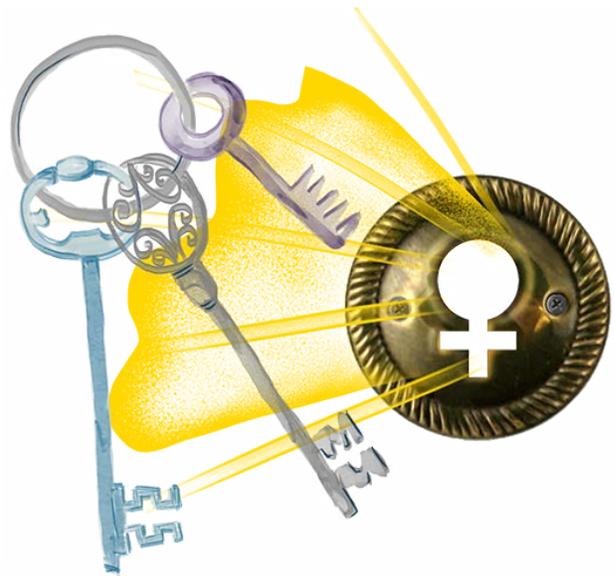
It’s worth noting that funding for gender does vary from region to region. For example, in India, which ranks 127th out of 146 in the world in terms of gender parity,²¹ it’s common for funders to have some level of focus on gender. However, in our experience, this focus doesn’t extend to program areas beyond women and girls, and most often doesn’t address the root causes of problems.²²

Without question, more funding can and should go to dedicated efforts to support women and girls. But the opportunity here goes far beyond “gender funders.” It’s an opportunity for every funder. By more consistently bringing a gender lens to the broader expanse of their giving—paying unique attention to gender balances and biases—funders can accelerate progress on the issues they target, whether livelihoods, climate, health, or any other field.

What would philanthropy done this way look like? It would mean, on any issue, understanding if, how, and why outcomes vary by gender. It would mean exploring solutions with an eye toward whether they’ll work for women, girls, and gender-expansive people—particularly those who face other forms of inequity. It would mean getting at the root causes—the social norms, narratives, and policies that suppress outcomes for women across fields—to unlock enduring progress. And it would mean pursuing work in ways that acknowledge the diverse lived experiences, leadership, and genius of women.

“You start to see gender as an opportunity framework that can open doors rather than close them. You begin to see multiple issues align, which drives innovation.”

— ALVIN STARKS, DIVISION DIRECTOR,
[OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS—US](#)



Considering gender in this way can advance a broad range of philanthropic goals by:

Reaching those most affected by a problem.

Simply put, funders who spotlight gaps in outcomes for women and tailor solutions accordingly are more likely to see those outcomes improve. In addition, because outcomes for women—particularly those who face other forms of inequity—sadly lag in so many issue areas, including gender considerations is a tried-and-true path for philanthropy to reach those most affected by a problem. For example, an economic development funder who considers gender would note that global labor force participation is 61 percent for women compared to 90 percent for men.²³ Women are also more likely to work in the informal or “gray” economy without protections like labor laws, health insurance, or paid sick leave.²⁴ Increasing women’s labor force participation would go a long way toward not only improving income for women, but also reducing overall poverty and inequality.²⁵

Uncovering new solutions.

Whether in communities, in formal leadership positions, or on the front lines of social change, women bring creativity and distinctive relational skills to developing solutions. And given their lived experience of the mindsets, behaviors, and policies that create higher barriers for women and girls, they’re particularly well positioned to cultivate opportunities to circumvent or dismantle those barriers. For example, Latinos face a range of barriers, such as language and racial bias, when trying to access the complex US health care system. As a result, while Latina women have a lower incidence of breast cancer in comparison to the overall US population, they’re 30 percent more likely to die from their illness.²⁶ Those who have been successful in navigating the system and who understand the need for advocacy are best suited to help others. Today, [Latinas Contra Cancer](#) has built a cadre of Spanish-language health advocates who are helping other Latinas with cancer access health care and, in the process, improving health care for the Latino community more broadly.

Avoiding approaches that deepen inequities.

When funders don't consider gender, they may inadvertently intensify the disadvantages women face. Take the government-led community health program in Liberia that aimed to compensate the role of community health workers, typically an unpaid, volunteer role dominated by women. Once this role became a paid position, the gender proportions worsened for women, and, as of 2022, while women make up 49 percent of community health supervisor roles, they hold a mere 17 percent of the new community health assistant jobs. New educational requirements for the now-paid positions, among other factors, put the role out of reach for many women. Several program partners, now equipped with a gender analysis, are reworking the design to better support the recruitment and retention of women.²⁷

In this paper, we explore five practices any funder can apply to increasingly consider gender as a way to speed progress in whatever field they're pursuing.

Five Practices You Can Apply to Consider Gender

- 1 Understand your starting point on gender
- 2 Analyze gender in your issue area
- 3 Design a portfolio that addresses gender in your issue area
- 4 Invest in women's leadership
- 5 Evolve your organization to support your gender aspirations

PRACTICE 1

Understand Your Starting Point on Gender

Reflect on if and how you think about and address gender in your giving today.

Here we offer some questions for reflection as well as a framework to help you explore the role gender plays in your work today. That understanding can then become a helpful starting point for prioritizing places where increasingly considering gender could advance your impact goals.



Do you consider gender in your work today?

As a first step, reflect on the following questions:

- Do you know how outcomes vary by gender in your work? Within the outcomes for women, girls, and gender-expansive people, do you know how they vary by other dimensions of identity where inequities often exist, such as race, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation?
- If data show disparities in outcomes, do you know the underlying causes? Do you work to address them?
- Do you know what percentage of your grantees are led by women and gender-expansive people? What about those who face other forms of discrimination, such as racism?

For many funders, the answer to these questions may be “no.” But simply asking them can lead to powerful realizations and deeper questions to explore.

A tool to help you take stock

There are several frameworks funders have found helpful in understanding the role gender does and can play in their giving. Among them is the [UN Development Programme's Gender Results Effectiveness Scale](#). Here we've adapted that framework, drawing on other sources as well, to arrive at a simple spectrum that divides work into three categories: gender unintentional, gender responsive, and gender transformative. See the graphic below for more details.

← Where are you on this spectrum? →

Gender Unintentional

PERPETUATES GENDER INEQUITIES

The default for many funders, gender-unintentional approaches don't consider the effects of gender.

EXAMPLE

In education, an intervention is designed to reach all students without considering the unique experiences of male, female, and gender-expansive people.

Gender Responsive

MITIGATES SYMPTOMS

Gender-responsive approaches address gender disparities and barriers, such as limited access, but don't aim to shift the norms and policies that create these disparities.

EXAMPLE

In education, an exploration of how factors like school attendance and performance differ for girls, boys, and gender-expansive people—and targeted interventions to reduce gaps.

Gender Transformative

CATALYZES LASTING CHANGE

Gender-transformative approaches go beyond addressing symptoms to “transforming harmful gender norms, roles, and relations while working towards redistributing power, resources, and services more equally.”*

EXAMPLE

In education, approaches that aim to address root causes like cultural norms, narratives, and the role men and boys play in keeping girls and gender-expansive students out of school.

*As described by the [UN Population Fund](#).

Note: This framework is adapted from multiple external sources, including the [UNDP](#), [WINGS](#), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, the Women's Funding Network, and Shake the Table. Many conversations with funders and experts also informed this framework.

Mapping your work to the framework's categories can help you understand how you're approaching gender in your work today. If you're like many funders, you may discover most of your giving is gender unintentional. Or you may find differences across your portfolio. For example, a funder may have a climate program area that doesn't consider gender at all, along with a separate women-and-girls program area focused on addressing root causes of gender inequity.

Some funders may have already gone through a similar exercise to interrogate how they're considering other equity dimensions in their grantmaking, such as race and socioeconomic status. Integrating gender into those efforts can open up important opportunities given how forms of discrimination compound one another. "We name structural racism and economic inequality as two structural barriers ... why isn't gender on our map?" asks one US-based foundation president. "What would it look like to incorporate that?"

Importantly, this is not one of those spectrums where everything "good" lies at the most intensive end. Yes, transformative work—creating long-term systemic change to stop inequity at the root—is essential. And gender-responsive approaches are also important. At any given time, women face near-term needs that can't wait for long-term solutions. As Dr. Ramatu Bangura, executive director of the [Children's Rights Innovation Fund](#), puts it, "You cannot make systemic change if people are hungry." Resourcing both responsive and transformative work will lead to a more vibrant sector.

At a minimum, funders can use a tool like this to be deliberate about which of their work is gender unintentional versus responsive or transformative. Over time, that awareness may lead you to shift a greater share of your work to become more gender responsive and even gender transformative.

While this framework might be particularly helpful for funders who haven't yet considered gender, there's room for everyone to take stock and set goals. For an example of how a funder who was already deep into gender work applied a similar tool, see "Example: How Echidna Giving analyzed its portfolio to guide its gender strategy."

EXAMPLE

How Echidna Giving analyzed its portfolio to guide its gender strategy

Though [Echidna Giving](#) has focused on girls' education and considered gender in its work for more than 15 years, "it was still somewhat hard to know systematically how gender was showing up across our portfolio," says Managing Director Erin Ganju. The funder wanted to discern what work was having a transformative impact on girls' education and their lives. Working with [The Global Center for Gender Equality](#), they developed a gender marker, or qualitative tool, to assess the level of gender integration in their grantees' programming. The gender marker is a series of questions by which grantees are placed into categories ranging from gender unintentional to gender transformative.



Select questions Echidna Giving used to categorize grantees:

- Can the grantee describe who is most affected by the problem?
Can they describe inequalities in girls' and boys' experiences?
- Do the activities respond to the different experiences and needs of girls, women, boys, and men?
- Are monitoring systems tracking, analyzing, and addressing changes in gender roles and relations?
- Does the work aim to address restrictive gender norms that impact negatively on education, women's empowerment outcomes, or both?
Does it aim to address differences in how girls and boys are valued?
Does it aim to change more than the daily life of girls and boys?
- Does the work aim to improve girls' and women's social status, value, respect, and/or access to power?

Armed with data, Echidna Giving was able to sharpen its understanding of where its portfolio is today and where they'd like it to go in the future. The gender marker has become a valuable learning tool to inform and facilitate conversations with grantees around potential strengths, gaps, and opportunities for bringing a stronger gender lens into their work. It is also a strategic internal tool for Echidna Giving to assess gender integration across their portfolio. While Echidna Giving is eager to pursue gender-transformative approaches, it recognizes moving all the way to transformative is not the answer for every grantee. It aims for 50 to 60 percent of the work it funds to be gender intentional or gender transformative.

"It's not a process where we're trying to judge our grantees, but instead, we are seeking to better understand their approach to integrating gender in their work," explains Ganju. "There are good reasons why you might want really quality early-grade reading programs to have a solid gender lens, but not necessarily be focused on gender-transformative programming."

Echidna Giving annually reviews its portfolio. For any funder, taking stock of gender is a continuous endeavor—one that evolves, advances, and pushes impact in new and different directions.

“The world knows that the challenge of girls’ education is not just getting girls into school. It’s also all the other dynamics in the community and the school that continue to double down on how girls are marginalized. We have to widen our aperture and understand this has to do a lot more with attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors—and those are much harder things to shift.”

— ERIN GANJU, MANAGING DIRECTOR, [ECHIDNA GIVING](#)

PRACTICE 2

Analyze Gender in Your Issue Area

Now that you have a sense of the role gender plays in your own giving today, explore how gender manifests in your issue area more broadly.

For many funders, the way gender intersects with an issue area won't be obvious. Through data-driven research and analysis—coupled with the insights of women leading frontline efforts—you can gain visibility into places where considering gender can catalyze results in your grantmaking.



Bringing data to bear

Starting with questions similar to those you used to take stock of your work in the previous section, explore the power dynamics and funding flows in your issue area more broadly.

- **What are the current outcomes by gender?** Within the outcomes for women, girls, and gender-expansive people, how do they break down by other dimensions of identity where inequities often exist, such as race, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation? What disparities emerge in the data?
- **For the disparities that emerge, what are the root causes?** What barriers hold women back in this issue area? Consider both formal (such as laws and policies) and informal (such as cultural and social norms) barriers.
- **Who has power and makes decisions?** For example, what major decision-making bodies or governing institutions are related to this issue today?
- **How does funding flow in this issue area?** Who receives funding? What about women who face other forms of discrimination, such as casteism or racism?

In answering these questions, you'll want to arm yourself with real data. Too often, conventional wisdom or intuition is incomplete or flat-out wrong. And disparities can be hidden from view, particularly when considering the intersection of gender and other inequities. Think of all the myths around cardiovascular disease being a men's issue, when it's the leading killer of women worldwide.²⁸ Meanwhile, Black women have a 50 percent higher risk of high blood pressure compared to white women.²⁹ Pair your data review with listening to on-the-ground partners. Women leading frontline efforts to halt deforestation, educate girls, increase crop yields, or whatever outcome you're focused on often will be your most reliable source of information and insight given their proximity to the challenges and deep experience working to address them.

Engaging with the questions above can help you not only identify opportunities for impact in your issue area, but also anticipate unintended consequences that can cause harm. Take an economic empowerment funder who funds women's employment opportunities. Research shows some women's empowerment programs can lead to an uptick in gender-based violence; there are clear patterns of husbands lashing out as their wives start earning income, owing to deeply engrained social norms that posit men as primary breadwinners.³⁰ Understanding the social norms and family dynamics that block progress can help ensure the funder backs efforts that truly advance women's employment and avoid potential backlash or regression.

Check out the tools others have developed to analyze gender across issue areas, including [Just Associates' publication on power analysis](#), the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Gender Integration Guide](#), and [Co-Impact's Approach to Gender Equity and Intersectionality](#).

EXAMPLE

The Hive Fund's view of gender in the climate space

Melanie Allen, co-director of the [Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice](#), considers herself first and foremost a climate funder. The Hive Fund focuses on climate issues in the Southern United States. But Allen also understands that, in the same way race and gender have historically been used to dictate where people can live and what jobs they can hold, they're at the core of how people experience climate problems—and racial and gender biases are impediments to their solutions. Indeed, race and gender bubbled to the surface when she saw who was most affected by pollution, who was waging the fight, and who wasn't receiving funding.



Allen explains, “Black communities are much more likely to be within three to five miles of a polluting facility than any other population.” Add to that the gender-based wage gap in the manufacturing and energy industries in the South,³¹ and it’s understandable how hard it is for people to leave when a polluting facility appears. “Choice is something afforded to people with economic access,” she says. “Black women are really stuck in these conditions.”

For the health of their families and communities, Black women have become leaders in the fight against polluting industries, often on negligible budgets. In recent years, Allen has seen women leaders of color—such as [those who opposed the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock](#)—“having David-and-Goliath moments with energy companies,” and yet they still are not being seen or funded by climate philanthropy.

This pattern resonates with Allen’s personal experience leading climate work prior to becoming a funder. As a Black woman piloting projects and getting recognized for her work, she felt lucky to receive a \$25,000 grant—while her white male counterparts pulled in millions from the same funder for ideas that she saw as borrowing from or overlapping with her own. “It’s been really difficult for philanthropic organizations to trust organizations that are led by people of color, that are led by women, and that are led by women of color,” she concludes, pointing to philanthropy’s tendency to favor large, white-led institutions—which, while important to the sector, are not the only players worth funding.

In that lack of funding for women of color—“these brilliant strategic minds!”—Allen and her Co-Director Erin Rogers saw immense opportunity for the Hive Fund. “If folks have had these huge impacts without philanthropic support, they can go leaps and bounds beyond that with adequate and consistent financial support,” she says.



PRACTICE 3

Design a Portfolio That Addresses Gender in Your Issue Area



Pull from a broad range of potential approaches to achieve deeper impact in your field.

Your issue-area analysis will likely prompt questions about how you can evolve your portfolio to increasingly address gender and accelerate your impact. The possibilities range from targeted additions to your current work to a more expansive reframing of your approach to your issue area. Here we lay out ideas for both *who* and *what* to fund.

The who

Many funders who seek to consider gender in their work will begin by funding women-led organizations.

- **Fund women-led organizations.** If you're newer to considering gender in your work, a great place to start is funding more women-led organizations in your issue area. There is extensive research on the strengths women bring as leaders, including being creative, adept at building caring connections and mentoring and developing others, and having concern for their communities.³² Moreover, as you seek to increasingly consider gender in the work you fund, women leaders—**particularly leaders of color**—bring distinctive assets and skills given their lived experience.
- **Fund collaboratives that focus on gender equity, including feminist funds.** Often led by women and gender-expansive people, gender-focused collaboratives offer ready pathways for any funder and may be especially helpful to those who haven't previously considered gender in their work. Collaborative giving vehicles already have the know-how that gender-focused work demands as well as the relationships with nonprofit leaders on the front lines of this work—allowing you to quickly have impact in your issue area. And they can be a stepping stone to increasingly considering gender in your own grantee portfolio as you learn from observing the collaborative's efforts and engaging with peer funders.

Feminist funds are a particularly important kind of collaborative to consider. Featured in [*Lighting the Way*](#), a joint report by Bridgespan and Shake the Table, they are the primary funders of feminist movements—organizations, leaders, and networks working together to change power structures that reinforce gender and other inequalities. Feminist funds work both within and across issue areas.

[Recent research](#) by Bridgespan and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation finds collaboratives have channeled more than \$2 billion to social causes.³³ Of the growing number of collaboratives, a large set focus on gender. [Additional research](#) by Bridgespan, the Gates Foundation, and Shake the Table identifies more than 100 funds that prioritize gender across a range of issue areas and approaches.³⁴

The what Your capabilities, experience, and aspirations as a funder will come into play as you choose from the many options of what to fund. We share some of these options below. There isn't one right way, but rather many high-impact approaches you can choose from to embed gender in your work.

- **Basic needs.** A health care funder who considers gender may take interest in the higher mortality rates and lack of health care for lower-caste people in India. While upper-caste women have a life expectancy of 65 years, that number drops to 59 years for Dalit women. This may lead them to fund, in the near term, basic health care for Dalit women as well as longer-term training for health care workers in cultural awareness and inclusion.³⁵ Even as you push for transformative change, you may respond to the basic needs of those you seek to serve.
- **Norms change.** An education funder who wants to reduce the number of children out of school—122 million of whom are girls³⁶—might support responsive strategies, like providing conditional cash transfers to families to incentivize girls' attendance, as well as go deeper, funding norms change to shift the mindsets of the fathers and brothers who believe it's less important to educate daughters than sons. (See "[Consider men and boys in your solutions](#)" on page 21.)
- **Narrative shifts.** Some funders also support norms change through broader work on narrative, such as through investments in media—film, journalism, and radio. These efforts can reach wide audiences, raising awareness and building empathy and understanding to ultimately unlock societal change.
- **Policy change.** An economic opportunity funder might fund policy change as a path to address barriers for women's workforce participation. Case in point, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is building out a portfolio of grants around tax policy and gender. To this end, it funded [a 2022 report](#) that explores gender bias in tax policy and provides policy tools to circumvent it. For example, the research names that flat-rate taxes have a higher impact on lower-income earners—disproportionately women—as they eat into a greater share of salary.³⁷ Hewlett also recently began funding the International Monetary Fund, which is considering gender and taxes from other angles.
- **Data and knowledge sharing.** A funder who seeks to understand the role of gender in their issue area and discovers important gaps in the data might invest in better data and knowledge sharing, building on the important work of the [Association for Women's Rights in Development](#), the [Global Philanthropy Project](#), the [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development](#), and others.



EXAMPLE

How the Hive Fund considers gender in its climate work

Circling back to the Hive Fund, which had a clear vision of *who* to fund: recall how Co-Director Melanie Allen identified the critical role Black women and other women of color play in leading climate efforts despite their chronic underfunding. The Hive Fund prioritized funding organizations led by women of color that were highly effective but were being overlooked. In its first four years, Hive has cultivated a portfolio of 126 grantee partners, 77 percent led by women of color, many of whom have never received significant general operating support. Allen is especially proud of their high percentage of women-of-color grantees in the climate space, where 80 percent of grants and grant funding otherwise goes to white-led groups.³⁸ When funders say they can't find compelling women-of-color-led organizations, Allen knows they're seeing "an incomplete picture."

Guided by a series of learning questions, the Hive Fund has also become sharper on *what* to fund, supporting a range of intersecting strategies to address inequities and spur progress on the transition to cleaner energy in ways that deeply benefit Black, brown, Indigenous, and other frontline communities.

In January 2024, Hive Fund grantees in Texas and Louisiana had a David-and-Goliath moment of their own when President Biden listened to frontline communities and **paused approvals** of export permits for liquefied natural gas to take a closer look at their impact on energy costs and the environment.³⁹ The Hive Fund supports approximately 45 grantees across the Gulf Coast who played a role in this victory. They are using communications, education, permit challenges, community engagement, and global finance campaigns to influence policy and slow the progress of gas exports.

This includes Louisiana-based Roishetta Ozane, who's been mobilizing her community in response to constant toxic flares, explosions, and other harms from polluting industries around her home. Ozane's children, who suffer from pollution-related asthma, skin conditions, and other illnesses, are also involved.⁴⁰ Together, the Hive Fund and other funders have resourced a growing ecosystem of frontline groups, many of them led by women of color, to collaborate with each other and larger national groups to execute, in the words of **one gas industry insider**, "unusually well-coordinated and targeted campaign[s]."⁴¹

At the same time, the Hive Fund supports grantee groups in developing scalable climate solutions in their communities, helping them pilot new funding and ownership models, and getting resources to bring their ideas to life. For example, in Houston, where severe weather and grid failures are increasingly common, Black and brown women piloted a program to reduce energy bills and improve community resilience through residential solar and batteries. They're now working with local government to expand the program countywide.

The Hive Fund also invests in broader narrative work to elevate the perspectives of women and gender-expansive people. As the people often most affected by the climate problems that Hive addresses, women’s voices are critical to offering solutions. To this end, it supported Black- and women-led news outlets, like [Capital B](#) and [The 19th](#), to build out their climate reporting in ways that connect climate with people’s lived experiences. Allen noted that the newsrooms’ stories, which aim to raise awareness and shift policy, are increasingly being picked up by the Associated Press and other mainstream outlets.

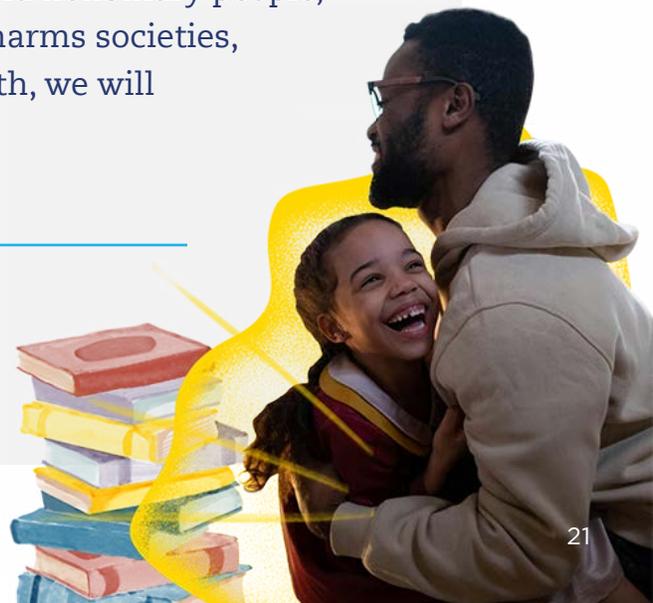
Consider boys and men in your solutions

If you’re an education or workforce funder, recognize that in many geographies, men and boys often decide whether girls can go to school or women can work. Indeed, in many issue areas, considering gender in philanthropy also often means seeing boys and men as part of the solution, starting in the home and extending into the workplace and government, where men still dominate decision making today. This includes the men within your organization, who can help you change minds, policies, and practices.

In India, [Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies](#) sees working in support of men and boys as essential to the success of their gender equity work. “Programming for men and boys doesn’t necessarily mean taking away from women and girls,” says Rohini Nilekani, chairperson of the foundation. “The lives of women and girls are impacted positively when men and boys also lead better lives and feel secure. We have to work with women and girls, and we have to work with men and boys. The pie needs to grow bigger to do both.” In the process of working with men and women alike, we have an opportunity to improve damaging gender norms for men as well—and raise boats for all.

“Too many of us, too many men, don’t understand that equity, justice, inclusivity, safety for women, girls, and nonbinary people, serves and saves us all. Broken masculinity harms societies, full stop. When we men reckon with that truth, we will finally find our shared humanity.”

— JIMMIE BRIGGS, PRINCIPAL, [SKOLL FOUNDATION](#)⁴²



PRACTICE 4

Invest in Women's Leadership



As you fund more women leaders, consider the supports they may need to succeed and stay in their decision-making roles.

When women assume decision-making roles, they face unique barriers and expectations. Women are less likely than men to have powerful internal sponsors to advocate for them.⁴³ And they are more than twice as likely to feel the need to “overcome others’ preconceptions” in their journeys as leaders.⁴⁴ Many of our interviewees also noted that women leaders in the nonprofit sector are underresourced, especially when it comes to flexible funding. Just as taking a gender lens to the work you support can increase your impact, taking a gender lens to how you support women leaders can help them achieve the deep and sustained impact you seek.

The experience of Fatima Goss Graves, current president and CEO of the US-based [National Women’s Law Center](#) (NWLC), demonstrates the importance and great potential of supporting women leaders of color. When Goss Graves, a Black woman, was appointed to her current leadership position, she assumed the role from two white leaders who had founded and co-led the organization for decades. Coincident with this transition, the Ford Foundation was in the process of making one of its game-changing [BUILD](#) grants to NWLC. Goss Graves reflects:

“If Ford had said, ‘we don’t trust this new leader’ and had pulled funding, that would have been really, really tough, right? I’m seeing that happen a lot right now with other funders, with some of these new leaders coming in facing high expectations that they are somehow going to fix a program that took 50 years to get us here, like, overnight. And it’s a lot of women of color in these new roles.”

Goss Graves credits the Ford Foundation’s support with allowing her to pivot at critical times. “New leaders need time and running room,” she says. In her case, foundation support helped her not just weather the pandemic but open up new arteries for impact, such as devoting two full-time staff members to focus on unemployment insurance—an area NWLC had worked on previously but required deeper attention in light of the COVID crisis, during which a disproportionate number of Black women lost their jobs and remained unemployed for lengthy periods of time.⁴⁵

Black and brown women in particular frequently find themselves standing on a “glass cliff”—elevated to executive positions after founding members’ departures but not given the support they need to succeed.⁴⁶ Steadfast funder support is often critical to the success of these leaders as they transition into these roles.⁴⁷

Amina Doherty, vice president of people, equity, and culture for [Equality Fund](#), is keenly aware of the barriers Black women around the world face even after they get the job.

“Black women leaders are not being set up for success inside and outside of philanthropy. We are being told to bring our great ideas, but we are not having them resourced. We are not being positioned to get things done. There is an unspoken lack of trust in Black women’s leadership. Connected to that, so many activists and movement leaders are feeling unsupported and burnt out.⁴⁸ This calls for resourcing our leadership, wellness, and sustainability.”

Doherty points to the importance of the places for women leaders to connect, share learning, and support each other. Resourcing your leaders to be part of such collectives can give them much-needed community. Doherty is part of [Black Feminists in Philanthropy](#), a global network of Black feminists working collectively to build community, resources, and power, as well as an inaugural fellow of [Black Women in Executive Leadership](#), or B-WEL, a global initiative working to improve the numbers, experiences, and impact of senior Black women leaders across sectors. “B-WEL is the first time I shared community with other Black women leaders at the executive leadership level who were grappling with many of my same questions and who felt safe enough to share solutions together,” she says. When you fund sabbaticals, opportunities to gather with peers, and other similar wellness supports, and even name them specifically, leaders feel empowered to use the funding in this way.

Funders can also be influential in evolving grantees’ boards to better support their organizations’ women leaders, especially women of color. While nonprofit staff are becoming more diverse, boards are not evolving at the same rate.⁴⁹ Often, a Black or brown female CEO may be the first or only woman on the board—if not both—and may not feel she has the board’s trust. Encouraging board evolution to reach, at minimum, gender parity can be a powerful tool for supporting new leaders.



GO FURTHER

Invest more broadly in the leadership of women

“You can’t have just and inclusive systems change without gender equality, and you can’t have gender equality without women in leadership.”

— OLIVIA LELAND, CEO AND FOUNDER, [CO-IMPACT](#)

Research shows having more women in decision-making roles can be a game changer in almost any issue area. Take climate, for example: countries with a bigger share of women in legislative bodies are more likely to ratify environmental treaties and adopt policies that address climate change.⁵⁰ And companies with more women on their boards are more likely to prioritize improving energy efficiency, reducing environmental impact, and investing in renewable energy.⁵¹

Or consider health care. Within the health sector, where women are disproportionately employed in low-paid jobs,⁵² having women move up the sector ladder can save lives. For example, in the United States, female heart attack patients treated by female emergency room doctors are twice as likely to survive as those treated by their male counterparts.⁵³ And governments with greater female representation are more likely to support reproductive rights, champion pregnant women, mothers, and children, and promote equal access to health care.⁵⁴

Women are underrepresented in leadership roles in every sector, especially women of color. In the United States alone, women of color represent 20 percent of the population⁵⁵ but hold 4 percent of C-suite roles,⁵⁶ less than 6 percent of Fortune 500 corporate board positions,⁵⁷ and less than 10 percent of seats in Congress.⁵⁸

Co-Impact believes women’s representation and leadership are integral to achieving gender-equitable outcomes and advancing just and inclusive systems. As such, [Co-Impact’s Gender Fund](#) bolsters women’s leadership in its three primary areas: health, education, and economic opportunity. Co-Impact supports initiatives that aim to advance women’s leadership at all levels—from households and communities to organizations and key institutions.

Co-Impact’s Gender Fund also invests in advancing women’s leadership in the domains of law and economics. Given the influence of these domains on national priorities, policies, and resource allocation, and the significant underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles, Co-Impact supports institutional change so more women can enter into and thrive in leadership positions.

Across all of these investments, Co-Impact prioritizes support to locally rooted, predominantly women-led organizations as integral to achieving their objectives.

Funders looking to create systemic change in their issue areas can consider funding fellowships, social networks, the care economy, and other leadership pipelines and supports to increase the representation of women in senior roles in government, business, and beyond—recognizing these leaders can shape rights, economic opportunities, and other decisions that are highly relevant for their specific issue areas.

PRACTICE 5

Evolve Your Organization to Support Your Gender Aspirations

Effectively embedding equity in your work requires making internal investments and changes and continuously revisiting your progress.



To live into the practices above, you may find internal change within your organization is required. How are gender equity and bias currently reflected in your organization’s structure, processes, and culture, and how does gender intersect with other inequities and biases (e.g., race, caste, income)? Sometimes called a “gender audit,” there are a number of tools that can guide you in this process, such as the [Gender at Work Framework](#). External experts can help, too.

Here are a few other ways you can start prioritizing gender within your organization, providing a foundation and building a shared vision for the work you seek to do in the world.

Demonstrate leadership commitment to elevating gender considerations.

Long-term, sustained change requires commitment from the highest levels of leadership, including board members, CEOs, and other senior leaders. Leaders can show this commitment by asking for gender metrics on dashboards and including gender considerations in decision-making criteria. Be transparent about the ways in which gender is evolving in your strategy and decision making to ensure clarity and accountability. Leadership can also make a stated commitment to gender equity internally and externally, as the Gates Foundation did when, in 2021, it announced a five-year, \$2.1 billion commitment to advance gender equality in three areas: economic empowerment, family planning and health, and women’s leadership.⁵⁹ More generally, leaders can have tremendous impact by always being the ones asking, “How is gender showing up in the work?”

Support women leaders in your organization.

Women leaders can unlock new ideas and approaches not only in your issue area but also in your own organization. What share of your leadership team members are women or gender expansive? Do women hold meaningful decision-making roles in your organization? How do their promotion rates and compensation compare to their male counterparts? How does this snapshot vary when you also consider other forms of inequity? If outcomes are unequal, interrogate why women and others facing inequity may not be advancing. Consider providing resources that will support women with diverse identities to thrive and reach leadership positions in your organization, including employee resource groups, mentorship programs, and flexible benefits that support caregivers.

The power of Black women's leadership in philanthropy

Read more about the power of Black women's leadership in philanthropy from Cora Daniels, senior editorial director at Bridgespan and columnist for *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*: [What Would Philanthropy Look Like if Black Women Were in Charge?](#)

Measure what matters.

Ensure measurement and evaluation practices track data disaggregated by gender and other dimensions of identity. This includes data about your organization (e.g., turnover and promotion data) and about your grantmaking (e.g., grantee leadership). Do this with an inquiry mindset: while being guided by an understanding of how inequity moves in society, be open to surprises about who's having disparate experiences at your organization.

In addition, know the demographics of your portfolio. In a sample of 77 funders in India, a mere 5 percent said they track the leadership composition of grantee organizations serving historically marginalized communities.⁶⁰ Recognizing the value of proximate leadership for impact, this is important missing data. And as you reflect on the impact metrics you track, it's worth asking: who decides what matters? Consider partnering with grantees to define the measures of success most important for their learning and impact. Be open to a range of approaches.

Provide
long-term,
unrestricted
funding.

As you increasingly support women leaders, especially those who face multiple inequities, be sure to give them the long-term, unrestricted funding they seldom receive. In our interviews, we heard over and over that there's still room for improvement in providing women leaders with flexible funding. Though this topic is widely spoken and written about in philanthropy, "the money is not always following the rhetoric," human rights leader Theo Sowa told us.

Finally, you don't need to reinvent the wheel. As you look to evolve practices within your organization and giving, explore how others incorporate gender equity into a variety of areas, from [measurement and evaluation](#), [sourcing and diligence](#), and [portfolio composition](#) to developing an internal culture that supports women. As a starting point, we recommend the [Children's Investment Fund Foundation's Equity Toolkit](#) as well as the [Equality Fund's Gender Lens Investing Criteria](#), which, while primarily for impact investors, could be helpful to a variety of funders.

Supporting gender programming across your portfolio



Whether or not you maintain a dedicated gender program area, consider spreading gender expertise across all your giving. As you move to a broad-based approach, be mindful that while gender is everyone’s problem, it can easily become no one’s problem. It’s important for all program areas to have targeted resources and clear goals for advancing gender in their work. It can also help to have centralized leadership or expertise. Identify a person or people accountable for gender at your organization, whether that’s a consultant, program area, or another explicit mechanism.

The Ford Foundation’s Centering Gender Initiative incorporates both a gender equity program area and a cross-program initiative. So, while the gender equity program area grapples with the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* decision and the global anti-gender movement, every other program area also has a gender mandate. “Today, every single program team at the foundation is analyzing how power and gender dynamics play a role in their work and embedding those lessons in their strategies and grantmaking,” the Ford Foundation has written.⁶¹ As a result of this work, the extractive industries team has funded a grantee partner to document the impact of large-scale mining, drilling, and agriculture on women and girls. The science and technology team has explored how automated lending models have granted women significantly lower borrowing amounts than their spouses, despite having the same income, credit score, and other factors.⁶² And program staff who are focused on fixing broken economic systems in the United States are exploring the connection between economic justice and the care economy.

“ At the Packard Foundation, we are committed to gender equity across our grantmaking areas. Prioritizing justice and equity throughout our work is essential for lasting change. We are excited to be on this journey and to have opportunities to learn together across teams and from other funders and grantee partners.”

— RUTH LEVINE, VICE PRESIDENT, JUST SOCIETIES AND CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER,
[THE DAVID AND LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION](#)

Just Get Started

In 2011, Terry Odendahl, then president and CEO of [Global Greengrants Fund](#), made the visionary decision to start moving much more money to women-led organizations. As an environmental funder, everywhere she looked, she saw women, especially Indigenous women, defending and protecting the environment. She saw the need, and she got started.

A decade later, Global Greengrants' current president and CEO, Laura García, remains dedicated to Odendahl's strategy of moving money to women. But with time and learning, the organization has sharpened its focus, seeking environmental groups not just led by women but also working to change women's position in society. In speaking out against mining companies, Indigenous women are also pushing against the local laws that prohibit their political participation and land ownership. "We have moved from increasing the number of women-led organizations to also focusing on advancing gender justice in our strategies," says García, who, by seeking a more level playing field for women, girls, and gender-expansive people, aims to change conditions for everyone. "We need everybody to tackle the biggest problems we are facing as humanity. It can feel disconnected to open the first door, but after that other doors will open more naturally."

Understanding gender equity runs through all our problems today, we urge funders to open that first door. Figure out where your work lies on the gender framework. Interrogate your portfolio by gender to truly understand who and what you're funding. And move forward knowing there are many ways to support women, girls, and gender-expansive people, and in so doing accelerate progress in your issue area.

While making big shifts overnight may feel out of reach, consider a phased approach. How can you get 10 percent or even 20 percent better in the next year? What areas of your work can you shift from unintentional to responsive to unlock greater impact? From responsive to transformative?

To view the issues you care about through a gender lens is akin to wearing glasses you didn't know you needed. We invite you to experience that joy and in so doing discover new pathways for impact in your work.

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Glossary

Gender	According to PFLAG , a set of socially constructed roles, behaviors, attributes that a given society considers appropriate, specifically surrounding the ideas of masculinity and femininity. Includes identities beyond male and female, such as gender expansive, transgender, and nonbinary. ⁶³
Gender equity	According to The Center for the Study of Social Policy , fairness in treatment of all people regardless of sex or gender identity or expression. Gender identity cannot be achieved without addressing other forms of overlapping oppression such as racism, casteism, and transphobia. ⁶⁴
Gender expansive	According to the Human Rights Campaign Foundation , “a person with a wider, more flexible range of gender identity and/or expression than is typically associated with the binary gender system.” ⁶⁵

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