

# Feminization of Philanthropy: Learning from the Women’s Movement

Thirty years ago, around the time when NCRP emerged as the brainchild of a coalition of nonprofit leaders and advocates, it was a very different world for women. The 1960s generation of American women led a movement to bring women to an equal footing in society. More women began working and gained a significant source of independent wealth and income. But the era was also marked by an emerging *feminization of poverty*<sup>1</sup>—female-headed households increasingly accounted for a larger portion of low-income households. And globally, some women had yet to enjoy the right to vote, let alone an education. For the first time, development organizations recognized that their work to improve emerging economies was disproportionately affecting women, who had few property rights and were often coerced into household and work restrictions.<sup>2</sup>

The philanthropic world showed little interest at the time in addressing gender-specific issues related to poverty; with the absence of women funders, women’s issues remained largely ignored. Thankfully, the larger

social issues in a way that was never done before. The Ms. Foundation, which emerged from this effort, began a movement that is leading philanthropy today through innovative and holistic poverty-alleviation models.

A recent Children’s Defense Fund report<sup>3</sup> states, “Perhaps the most effective way to ensure greater educational opportunities for girls and women is to engage a critical core of women and girls in all efforts to improve girls’ and women’s future.” The past three decades are evidence of the truth in this philosophy. In the 1980s, women’s foundations gained momentum, and in 1985 NCRP helped host the first National Conference of Women’s Funds, out of which the Women’s Funding Network was created. As women increasingly gained a voice in philanthropy, girls’ and women’s issues came to the fore of social change.

Since then, awareness of women’s issues has greatly increased. Some large foundations now earmark funds for women’s and girls’ issues; U.S. development organizations are required by law to be gender sensitive in their work. Women enjoy a greater role in American society, where 41 percent of those reporting incomes of \$500,000 are women.<sup>4</sup> Globally, barriers to girls’ education are being addressed, and

micro-credit programs, such as the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh (whose founder, Muhammad Yunus, just won the Nobel Peace Prize), are helping women gain economic independence.

But funding programs that address women’s and girls’ issues does a lot more than just help women and girls. Funding women means funding communities:

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women’s social movement emphasized the need for power, not just wealth, from the onset. Economic inequality and lack of decision-making power were identified early on as the root of gender inequity in societies. In 1972, the editors of *Ms. Magazine* decided to pool the newly granted wealth generated by women and channel it toward fighting poverty and

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When women's education has been emphasized in societies, there has been a decline in child mortality, smaller and healthier families, fewer HIV outbreaks, greater emphasis on children's education, and a greater presence of women in the political process.<sup>5</sup>

Women's funds take pride in approaching poverty alleviation through nontraditional methods. They emerged partly from the 1974 Filer Commission report that criticized traditional philanthropy's inability to tackle women's issues (the same report, coincidentally, that triggered the creation of NCRP). "When common societal problems are considered by how they specifically affect women and girls, solutions to these problems differ from traditional approaches," the Women's Funding Network explains.

Women's funds emphasize a community-style relationship among funds, donors, organizations, and the women and girls served. Funders are often more engaged in the work being done on the ground than is the case in traditional philanthropy. Women's funds also focus on community-based approaches that provide holistic methods to alleviating poverty.

The impact of these innovative solutions on philanthropy is evidenced by the funds' role in important issues as diverse as education and disaster relief. The Ms. Foundation created a Take Our Daughter to Work Day, a public education campaign that aims to engage children to discuss the continuing disparities between genders in the workplace. The Women's Funding Network used its global reach to emphasize the relationships between the global and national aspects of issues such as sex trafficking. And when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast last year, these two organizations united to provide disaster relief through an integrated approach to housing, child care, employment,

health and safety. The result was a successful program that recognized the intricate relationships among these diverse social issues, all of which stemmed from an underlying problem: poverty.

In this issue, we explore this unique sector of philanthropy and its important role in creating social change, and seek to gain from it valuable lessons that will help us all fulfill our missions to help those in need. Kiran Ahuja, national director of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, addresses the need for a new women's movement relevant to today's issues. Norma Timbang investigates the funding sources used to help victims of human trafficking, looking carefully at the motives of such funders. And Chris Grumm, president of the Women's Funding Network, shares with NCRP the accomplishments, challenges, and vision of today's leaders in women's funding.

The women's funding movement has taught philanthropy valuable lessons. We have seen how new approaches to the same problems can help us be more effective. And we have learned the importance of providing comprehensive solutions to prevent negative side effects in the programs we implement to empower communities. But sadly, despite evidence pointing to their effectiveness, only 6.4 percent of philanthropic dollars was earmarked for programs for women and girls just five years ago.<sup>6</sup> Women philanthropists have been the main funders of women's issues for far too long.

Even today, women continue to "do 66 percent of the work in the world, produce 50 percent of the food, but earn 5 percent of income and 1 percent of the property."<sup>7</sup> There is clearly a lot of work ahead, for *all* of us.

*This editorial was written by Ambreen Ali, communications associate at the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.*

## NOTES

1. The term was coined by Diana Pearce in 1978. She was a visiting researcher at the University of Wisconsin who published a paper noting that poverty was becoming "feminized" in the United States. According to Pearce, almost two-thirds of the poor over age 16 were women.
2. Nilüfer Çagatay, "Engendering Macroeconomics and Macroeconomic Policies," United Nations Development Programme, Social Development and Poverty Elimination Division (October 1998).
3. Ecaterina Marshall, "Promoting Girls' Education: Where Do We Stand and How Do We Move Forward?" Children's Defense Fund, (2006).
4. Toddi Gutner, "Philanthropy with a Woman's Touch," *BusinessWeek* (October 30, 2000).
5. Ecaterina Marshall, "Promoting Girls' Education: Where Do We Stand and How Do We Move Forward?" Children's Defense Fund, (2006).
6. Molly Mead, "Gender Matters: Funding Effective Programs for Women and Girls," Tufts University (June 2001).
7. Patrick Healy, "Hillary Clinton Stars at Husband's Meeting on World's Ills," *New York Times* (September 23, 2006).